

ISSUE
26

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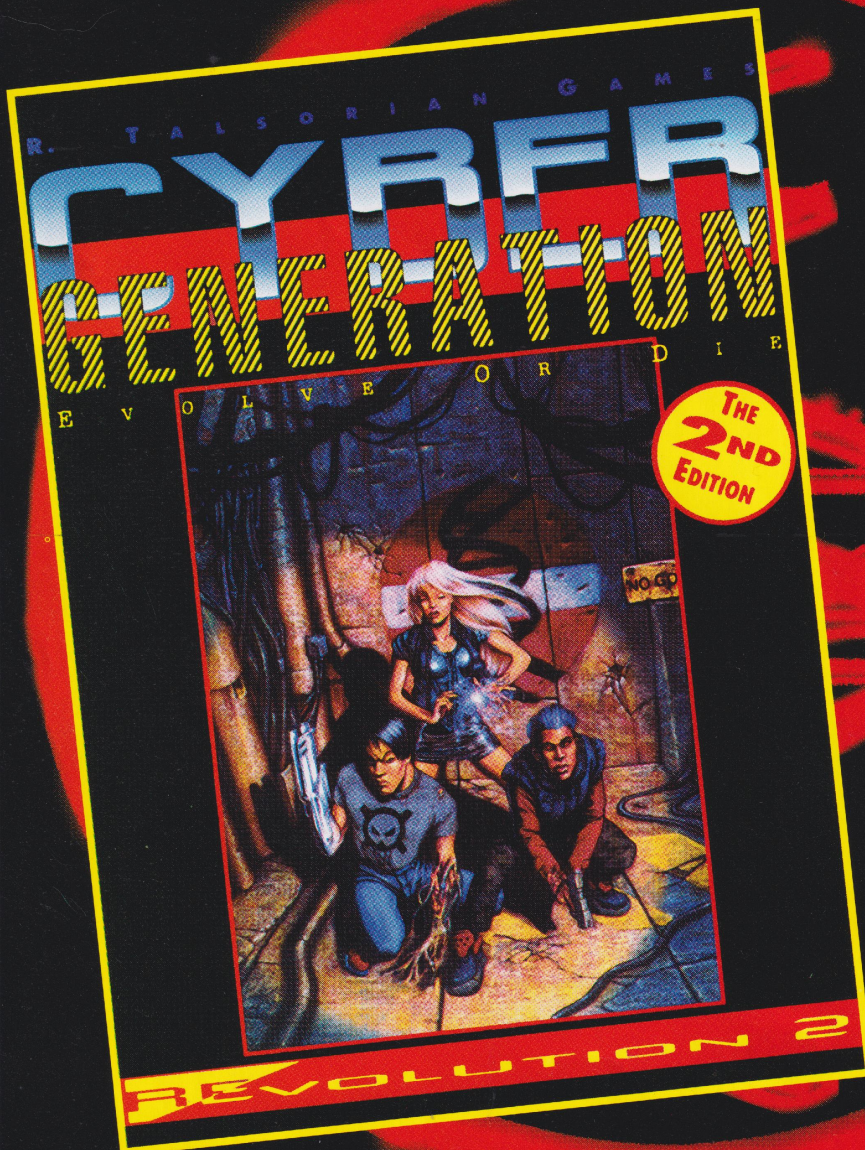
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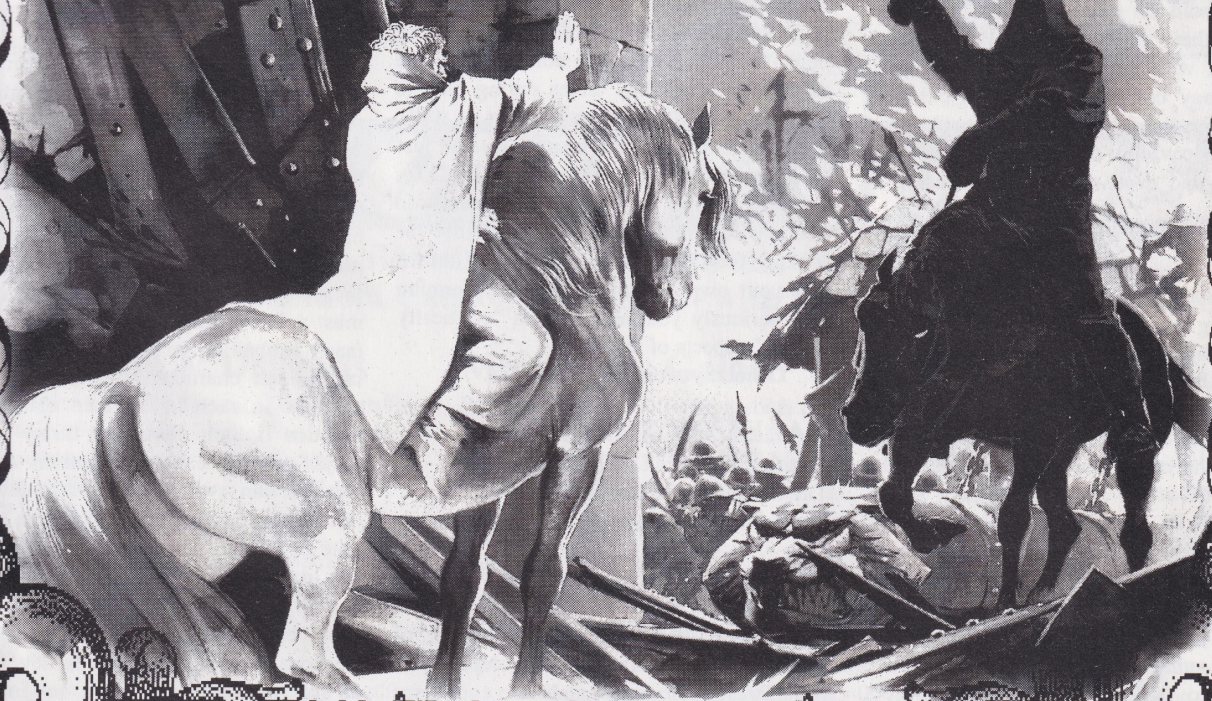
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Fantasy Role-Playing Game
Published By Escape Ventures
Reviewed by Lee Sheppard

The game's designers have obviously listened to the wishes of the over 2000 playtesters. Nearly every rule has its own accompanying example to aid player and referee understanding. One appendix even provides a much larger example, showing how all the various rules fit together. A comprehensive glossary and index are included, and a short introductory scenario helps to get new players started. Even the binding of the book is designed so that it can be opened flat for reading! The rule book is also packed with illustrations, most of a

Definitely worth a look.

The Gloranthan Magazine

Reviewed by Paul Mitting

One article from Issue 12 that any

But enough of this stuff, we came here to kick butt! This is where **DM2** really excels over its competitors, atmosphere! Turn off the lights, get rid of the music, (does anyone

ever listen to that stuff anyway?) and pump up the sound effects. The greeblies shuffle and groan in the distance, growing louder as they stalk you. The monsters are excellent. When they attack, you must defend in "real time". Spells must be readied, weapons swung and tactical moves made all as the monster is biting your legs off. Good fun, but I have some gripes.

The combat interface is clumsy. Each combat action takes up the action area, locking access to the other characters. While this real time action adds to the excitement, there is supposed to be four of us, so why can't my fighter still be swinging while my mage restocks his spells? Setting up spells for casting also tends to take too long. Each spell consists of three or four components. Each component is represented by a symbol one each chosen from the four sub-menus. Learning the spells is a matter of getting the right combination of symbols in the right order. Discovering new spell effects can be quite interesting, but once I've worked out the formulae for a fireball, why can't it just be listed as an option? And my final peeve is with inventory management. Why must I collect all my thrown rocks, put them into my inventory then open that to put them back into the throwing pouch? Grrrr!

Whinges aside, I do love playing this game. It comes as close to the "real life" roleplaying experience as any computer simulation I've seen. The game setting is rich with that special dungeon adventure atmosphere and it is very expansive. There always seems to be something else to explore so you never get the "I'm completely stuck it must be something I missed on the first level blues!". The puzzles are tricky without resorting to some of the appallingly ridiculous "you'll never solve it without the twenty five dollar clue book" puzzles I've run across in other games.

My only real disappointment is that DM2 is just more of the same. The graphics and sounds are nice, but not much different, or improved on the originals. So where's the 1995 hi-res texture mapped 3-D objects such as *Mechwarrior 2*. Where's the digitized speech and video images of the latest *Star Trek*? But don't let this put you off; what the game lacks in state of the art presentation it more than makes up for in sheer absorbing game play. If you love your "dungeons" this one's for you!

BLACKHAND'S STREET WEAPONS 2020

CyberPunk 2020 Supplement

By R.Talsorian Games

Reviewed by Paul Mitting

At last, collected in one book, is every gun and weapon ever printed in a *CP2020* sourcebook or game rules. As the cover blurb



says, "over 250 weapons compiled in one volume plus one new gun!". Inside are the game stats, prices and some brief notes on each weapon. A three page spread at the centre illustrates a selection of some of the weapons, as well as the one new gun. To complete the book are some pages of rules regarding different ammo types available.

One thing which I really liked was a page explaining how to calculate the recoil for the different weapons and what the minimum BOD rating is to safely use them. This means that if that new gun you've bought requires a higher BOD rating than yours, every time you fire it there is a risk of injury to you and a chance of dropping the weapon. One of the sample calculations for a 25mm pistol requires a minimum BOD of 23! They are generous enough to say that if the min BOD is 9 or less, anyone can use the weapon (even you BOD 1 wimps).

This supplement is not really essential if you have the other game sourcebooks, but it does present the guns all in the one place. It can save a lot of time if your players like using as many weird and wonderful weapons as possible. One failing of the product is that there is no listing which explains what the different game stats for the weapons mean. I know this info is in the basic game, but it would have been a simple courtesy to include them here.

This one is for the gun nuts in your CyberPunk game. That includes me.

Lock and load, amigos!

INDIANA JONES AND THE TOMB OF THE TEMPLARS

Masterbook Adventure Supplement

By West End Games

Reviewed by Lee Sheppard

As the title so obviously suggests, this is an adventure book for the *World of Indiana Jones* RPG, this famous archeologist being just one of a number of movie licenses picked up by West End Games for its Masterbook generic gaming system. Not that you actually get to play Indiana Jones though, just some of his acquaintances (reminds me of the old James Bond RPG).

Tomb of the Templars contains three adventures. The first, the Templar adventure, concerns the lost treasure of the Knights Templar, supposedly hidden somewhere in Scotland. The *Druid's Curse* involves ley lines, stone circles and (of course) Nazi agents. Nazis pop up again in the third and longest adventure, *Indiana Jones and the Sword in the Stone*. This is the best adventure of the three, involving a search for the legendary sword of King Arthur, Excalibur. Each adventure comes with NPCs, maps, interesting background material and suggestions for further scenarios. With a bit of tweaking, some of these adventures could also make excellent *Call of Cthulhu* sessions, and fans of that game might also want to have a look at this release.

The most annoying feature of the

product is its sloppy editing. There are numerous typing errors, some of which are particularly amusing (did you know there was a famous Scottish King called Robert the Burce?). The fact that this was written by Americans and set in England also creates a few humorous moments, especially for those of us who are fairly well versed in English history and/or culture (chain-wielding, leather-jacketed bovver boys in 1936??). All in all, it smacks of a too hasty release schedule.

This is the world of pulp adventure, with stereotypical villains, last second escapes from certain death and pure unadulterated excitement - a task the Masterbook game system handles well. Good fun.

BEYOND THE WALL

Pendragon Supplement

By Chaosium Inc.

Reviewed by Paul Mitting

Pendragon is generally acknowledged as one of the best roleplaying games around. It relies on players becoming involved with their character's lives and ambitions, their family and their foes. This supplement for the north of Britain carries on this style of gaming, encouraging interaction with its inhabitants rather than treating them as encounters to be defeated. Having said that, there is still plenty of opportunity for bloodshed for the more militant player knights. A few of the more dangerous mythical beasts of Celtic legend are there to be combated, as well as a whole horde of tattooed Picts. Ger into yem!

The source material covers both the environment (climate, geography, population etc.) and the culture of the inhabitants. Christianity and Chivalry have made few inroads into the Pictish culture, so there are large sections on the special magical talents of the Fiosaiche (Shamans). This focuses in particular on the Samhladh, who are powerful spirits which have ancient relationships with a clan.

An integral part of the supplement is the extensive adventure in the land of the Picts. In essence, the player knights are to escort a Priest to the Picts in an effort to convert them. Of course, what may seem an easy task never will be. There are also mini-adventures for local knights and other characters to play through, and notes and suggestions on setting up a campaign based on characters who are from the clans.

I enjoyed both the source and adventure material. This book also gives a pretty good insight into the minds and culture of the early Pictish people. On the other side of the coin, the supplement doesn't really detail the actual lands and places much. Most places get a single paragraph or two, meaning the referee will have to do a bit of prep work.

The cover and interior artwork is average - they convey the look and feel of the people without being inspiring - but the maps are excellent. Pity they are only black and white, as a colour map would have added depth to the detail provided.

For those wanting to take their Pendragon characters beyond Hadrian's wall, this is a very worthwhile investment.

OVERPOWER

Collectible Card Game

By Marvel/Fleer

Reviewed by Chris Johnson

OverPower is a game of super heroes and super villains from the Marvel universe. Around 40 characters appear in this initial version, with the rest to come in the next edition. The game mechanics are fairly simplistic. Basically, you start with 4 Villains/Heroes and you use power cards to pound the tar out of your opponent's Heroes/Villains. Each character has three power ratings; fighting, strength & energy. Attacks can be made using one of these three types. You can make a basic attack, just with a power card, or you can combine a universe card, such as a nearby object or some training to boost the attack. In addition to this there are five or so cards specific to each character. These are Special cards and can only be used by the character named.

There is another, optional, bit to the game where players gamble on the outcome of a battle using Mission cards. These cards are not permanently exchanged, but they are used as a second set of victory conditions.

The artwork is good, but it's all the same. Advertised as "state-of-the-art CGI coloring" it looks to be coloured on a computer. Maybe Magic: The Gathering has raised my standards too high.

One nice touch is the ability to purchase preconfigured starter decks. There are 6 different decks, each with specific heroes and the Special cards to suit them. I bought the Rogue/Storm/Bishop/Gambit pack, secure in the knowledge that I wouldn't have to buy 12 packs before I got the one character I wanted. There are, of course, a few holes in the system. Some cards/characters are purely more powerful than others. This means that someone who has bought a large number of cards can produce a substantially more powerful deck than one of the starters. Also, as you lose characters, or as they get K.O.'d, a starter deck tends to fall apart, with more and more cards unplayable.

However, I'm sure the game will evolve nicely and I recommend it to anyone with a foot in the Marvel world and a foot in the trading card game world. The game is fun, often degenerating into a brawl. It has HUGE potential, both on the art front and the universe it is drawn from.

BOOK OF ANGELS

Generic Vampire Roleplaying Sourcebook

By Grymalkin

Reviewed by Adam Whitt

Book of Angels is a 58 page photocopied, staple bound, clear Contact covered, self-published book of ideas and character types that are readily adapted to any of the current crop of angst-ridden gothic punk roleplaying games but are most obviously aimed at the *Vampire: The Masquerade* audience. The Fallen Angels of the book's title are a "familie" of vampires spawned in Seattle who have recently moved into and pretty much sewn up Australia.

The book fleetingly covers the history, structure, powers, goals and main players of the Fallen Angels. Some of the ideas presented are tantalisingly good, with excellent storytelling potential, but the follow-through on these ideas is lacking. I got the impression that this book was culled from the author's thriving and innovative Vampire campaign but in the process of extricating the material from possible White Wolf copyright infringements the life-essence of the campaign was bled dry.

For me the most noteworthy thing about this book is that it is an all-Australian product. Not wanting to sound too high and mighty but we at Australian Realms see ourselves as striving to kickstart an Australian-based roleplaying industry. I know there have been similar attempts in the past but in this age of affordable professional DTP we reckon much more can be achieved with the talent that undoubtedly exists in Australia. It is great to see Grymalkin making the leap of faith necessary to bring out product.

Check it out.

GURPS ROBOTS

GURPS Supplement

By Steve Jackson Games

Reviewed by Paul Mitting

I have always had a soft spot for Robots and Cyborgs. I think they make great player characters and even better bad guys. GURPS Robots offers this and more.

The book is well presented. It has hordes of very neat illustrations (plus a few ordinary ones, but they are in the minority) and 125 odd pages of text. The wealth of information in this book is staggering, and it covers everything you could think of for designing, playing and refereeing Robots and their brethren. That is probably the one gripe I have with the sourcebook - too much information. It would take a seriously dedicated GM to design more than a couple of Robots from scratch. The rules cover every little aspect of the construction process. Even a rules fanatic like me was stunned. As a saving grace, the book does provide a

number of completely detailed designs, and these cover the needs of most refs or players.

Where GURPS Robots excels is in the sections on how to play a Robot (or Cyborg, Android, Sentient Computer etc). Several genres are examined, how to bring these character types in, and the roles they'd fill.

This is a great sourcebook for anyone wishing to use Robots in any roleplaying game. Be prepared to give it a bit of tweaking though - and don't forget your scratch pad and calculator!.

CLOSE QUARTERS

Battletech Novel by Victor Milan
Reviewed by Graham Holman

Close Quarters is, as the title suggests, an extremely close look at the life of one Cassiopeia (Cassie) Suthorn. This is one of the darkest and gristiest Battletech novels I have ever read. Named after the Greek Mythological figure Cassiopeia who eventually became one of the constellations, this Cassie is no Greek Goddess. More akin to the Sharon Stone ice-pick wielding maniac of *Basic Instinct* fame, this heroine gets her kicks in killing anyone who tries to get close to her. Martial arts expert, seductress and psycho-killer are just a few of the images that come to mind. Victor Milan has obviously been given the commission to write the steamier side of Battletech universe history.

Shifting from the Capellan Confederation to the Draconis Combine, the story follows the troubled life of Cassie Suthorn. Orphaned at three and captured by mercenary Mechwarriors at sixteen, Cassie grows into a very troubled and extremely dangerous adult. With a hatred of the mechanical Mech monsters burnt deep into her psyche, she is caught between the deep bonding that being a member of the Caballeros mercenary family imposes on her, and her hatred of all things associated with Mechs. Rescued from sure death by the Caballeros, Cassie takes on a blood debt which she can never repay.

Usually the violence and conflict in Battletech novels is confined to political infighting and mechanical destruction, with Mech pilot deaths a passing, but rarely intimately described, consequence. In *Close Quarters*, the face to face details of death are readily portrayed. This and the black workings of Cassie's mind give a very dark feel to the whole story.

Even if you're not into the Battletech universe, you'll have to read this one just to see that not all such novels are sanitised history backgrounds for those who want to play the game. This novel is low on politics and high in action and adventure, even if it does have a psychotic for a heroine.

One of the better books in the series.

NEO TRIBES - The Nomads of North America

CyberPunk 2020 Supplement
By R.Talsorian Games
Reviewed by Paul Mitting

This sourcebook complements the earlier *Land of the Free* and *Home of the Brave* sourcebook and adventure. Detailed within its pages is a complete run down on Nomad culture and a description of some of the Nations and Families that make it up.

Of particular interest to Nomad players (and refs) are the new roles available, with some new specialist abilities. I particularly like the Warrior class, who are a type of Nomad Solo. Their special ability is Warpath, which is similar to the Solo ability Combat Sense. This is long overdue, as I always hated the way Nomads were regularly beaten in Initiative by city-bred gunboys.

Also on offer is a whole new range of guns (of course) plus some neat survival and lifestyle equipment for the Nomad on the go. Vehicles get some coverage, and it is nice to see that despite the advances made in technology, the humble V-Dub Bug still gets used in 2020. Those things will never die.

Neo-Tribes gives the referee ample coverage on how to run a Nomad-based Cyberpunk campaign, and how to fit other Edgerunners in. As an added bonus there is also an adventure with which to introduce players to the unique Nomad lifestyle.

This is one of my favourite games, and the quality of products like this keeps me coming back for more. Deep down, most gamers would like to run the roads, and this is a great way to go.

Join the Neo-Tribes, hombres.

THE AGENT OF LIGHT

Limited-Series Comic
Produced by Wot Virtu Comics
Reviewed by Lee Sheppard

This six-issue, black & white comic series (Issue 1 is out now) obviously represents a labour of love for creator (and occasional *Australian Realms* artist) Shane Parker, as he has not only written and illustrated *The Agent of Light*, but created his own comics company to produce it. As small press publishers ourselves we know where Shane's coming from, and we're happy to support such Aussie ingenuity.

The first issue contains two stories. *The Agent of Light* is a combination of cyberpunk, secret agents, magic and X-Files type intrigue. Encounter is a straight AD&D type adventure, namely a combat scenario between a spell caster and a few monsters.

Both the storytelling and artwork need a little bit of work, but this is only to be expected from a one man show, and both show promise. Although this first part was a

little combat heavy, *The Agent of Light* looks as though it has the potential to pan out into an interesting storyline. Encounter was certainly the better illustrated piece, very reminiscent of Wendy (Elfquest) Pini.

This isn't the X-Men, but then I've seen a hell of a lot worse than this. Check it out.

HOMELANDS

Magic the Gathering Expansion Set
By Wizards of the Coast
Reviewed by Chris Johnson

Well, it has been an amazing year for Magic releases hasn't it boys and girls? First 4th, then Ice Age, followed by Chronicles and finally *Homelands*. The gaming shops must love it. I know my funds have run out, how about yours?

Anyway, I bet you're trying to decide whether to by some *Homelands* packs or that food you've been promising yourself. I'm sorry to say that I recommend you starve just a little longer. *Homelands* is just too good. While the "power players" rubbish it, anyone that plays to enjoy the fantasy world would have to be pleased with the set.

With more Legends, Enchant Worlds, Sengir stuff, Serra things, Minotaurs, Orc bits, Faeries, Falcons, Bats, Heroes, Clockwork creatures, a Bear, a Spider, a Troll, a Serpent, a Wolf, more counterspell stuff, Token creatures, Tri-colour Lands and Plainswalking, (deep breath), there should be something for everyone. Detail and thought has even gone into the artwork. Both versions of cards with multiple artwork are done by the same artist. Continuity between sets has been maintained by using Anson Maddocks for all the Minotaurs, Tom Wanerstrand for the Pirates, and to a lesser extent, Amy Weber for most of the Clockwork stuff. The only downer on the artwork side is the lack of Quinton Hoover and Drew Tucker.

Overall, *Homelands* is good gear.

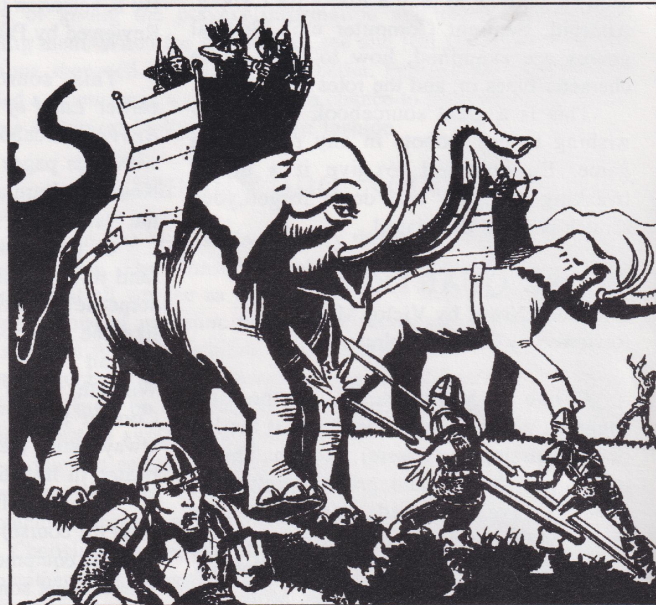
PLAYER'S OPTION: Combat & Tactics Skills & Powers

Two AD&D Rulebooks
Produced by TSR, Inc
Reviewed by Adam Whitt

In *Combat & Tactics* the flawed, but simple and genuinely playable AD&D game combat system undergoes an overhaul. Only time and play will tell if the supposedly opposed ideals - high action adventure and gritty realism - can be reconciled with these new rules which introduce hit locations, critical hits, wound effects, armour destruction as well as new weapons, fighting styles and tactics for PCs and monsters.

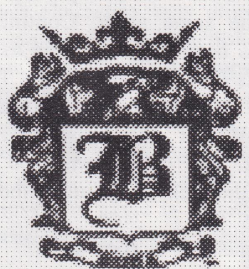
There are some good sections in this

The Last Act of Defiance



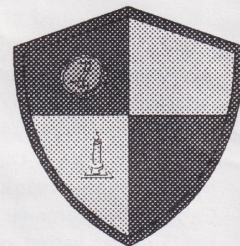
- My ! What Big teeth you have Grandma
 - Knew I should have gone for the Tower Shield !!
 - It might help if my weapon was facing the enemy
 - Run Awaaaaaaay
- you - Gee. Sarkers have those funny things that no body knows the name of at the back of their throat too.
- Wax on. Wax off

- Knew I should have been a &#^\$ Archer
- Can you get Pikes in XXXXXXL size?
- Ouch
- If you strike me down I shall become more powerful than could possibly imagine.
- My brains, his Steel and your strength against 60 Elephants and you think a little head jiggle is supposed to make me happy. Hmm



MIDGARD

The Game of Medieval Intrigue



Siege Combat

Cities are tough. This goes without saying. You can hardly have an established city that gets wiped out every few years by a bunch of bored barbarians out to have a good time. With all those moats, pits, spiky things and above all ('cause they are) walls, would be attackers often find themselves covered more in boiling oil than in glory.

In Midgard, sieges are carried out over a number of turns by a number of players. This is not because you have to, its just that if you don't take your time you tend to die a bit (well, actually a lot). Depending on the size of the city, the battle might have to be fought on 8 different fronts and as either a land or naval assault.

However, things are not always rosy for the defender. Starvation, popular uprisings, and attackers breaking down your gates are some of the wonderful things that city leaders have to cope with during a siege. You set up your wonderful

city, generate a few taxes to help finance some other operations and all of a sudden people seem to be a little to keen to get into your city. (The axes give it away). Things would be a lot easier if their were not all those other irritating people (mostly from Queensland) getting in the way. Oh well

Midgard

Midgard is a mixed moderated Play by Mail game of medieval factions that currently has about 430 positions played by players all over Australia and a few from around the world. The Midgard rule book, set up and 2 turns costs \$15 with turn costs set at \$7 per turn. Ask for a copy of the Free House Magazine

The Baron's Australian Midgard
PO BOX 542
LINDFIELD NSW
2070

book if you are a combat junkie and want to explore the bloody intricacies of hack and slash. On the down side, there is a lot of repetition and restating of stuff here that has already seen the light of day in the *Player's* and *Fighter's Handbooks*. Purely optional.

The **Skills and Powers** book is a much more attractive proposition for mine, with many parts that probably would have made a 3rd Edition worthwhile. Under the Skills and Powers optional rules, character creation becomes very flexible; the introduction of a point system (slots) enables you to customise their PC's skills mix to suit your own view of what your character is, not what the rules say it has to be. The day of the sword-swinging wizard has arrived in AD&D, at last!

The optional non-weapon proficiencies rules are also much improved, and we're now approaching a truly "skills-based" game system, although goodness knows why we needed to split the six basic characteristics central to AD&D down into sub-statistics resulting in 18 numbers to fit on the already overburdened character sheet. There is some pretty pointless hair-splitting going on with some of the explanations for the various sub-characteristics, all with little noticeable addition to playability.

This book also provides a streamlined psionics system, bringing psionic combat into line with the standard d20/THACO-based combat mechanics of AD&D. A good move. Other optional goodies on offer are an expanded list of player character races, some character kits, and four schools of magic.

I'd say that these 'optional' rulebooks are bringing in a lot of useful refinements to the AD&D game but in order to create separate volumes under each title the designers are inevitably resorting to useless padding. This means you have a lot of chaff to sort through to find the wheat. Add to this the number of hardbacks that make up the core rules now, and you wonder if we AD&D players would not have been better served if TSR had bitten the bullet and produced the proposed but shouted down 3rd Edition.

PLATT'S STARPORT GUIDE

Star Wars Supplement
West End Games

Reviewed by Martin Gibbs

This is supplement fills in a gap in data files of any Star Wars referee. There is a brief introduction listing a few points on ship repairs, spaceport regulations, rules and penalties, some of which have been partly gleaned from earlier sources. There is a really nice Bureau of Ships and Services form to copy for your players starship starship profiles. I am sure that all faithful

Imperial spacefarers will complete them in correct and unambiguous detail. The remainder of the book contains details of seven major-spaceports, with statistics and written descriptions, new creatures, ships and adventure hooks. There are plenty of maps and diagrams of the facilities included, with much of the artwork in sketched colour.

Each Starport is a potential adventure in itself, leaving plenty of opportunity for development. Pulling into spacedock is rather analogous to fantasy PCs doing downtime in the village/city between adventures. There are plenty of opportunities for players to make repairs/modifications ("Do you have a permit for that turbolaser emplacement?"), make new contacts, and do a little wheeling and dealing... legal or otherwise. Just make sure that you don't score a Class 1 Infraction near a Stellar Class Port, a place that makes a Star-Destroyer look like a moped parked at a bus depot.

HEROES OF MIGHT & MAGIC

Strategic Fantasy Computer Game
Produced by New World Computing, Inc
Reviewed by Nick Leaning

I really enjoyed playing the *Might & Magic* fantasy role-playing series, so receiving this CD-Rom for review was a trip down memory lane for me. Those earlier games presented great challenges (and value for money) because of their great size - it took many hours of play to explore the game world and complete all of the tasks you were set. Heroes of Might and Magic is also a great challenge but of a completely different kind; this time you play a warlord on a strategic quest to conquer the Realms and, so far, after several hours of learning and playing the game, I have yet to defeat any one of the three computer opponents. But I won't be giving up just yet because it is great fun to play, even when you are being beaten.

The game plays a little bit like the Realms office favourite, Warlords, in that you control a commander who from his starting town must recruit heroic allies and raise armies that then go out into the wider world to explore it, pick up the various resources on the map and slowly build wealth, resources, and power before taking on the other commanders that you are up against. Where this game differs is in the level of detail. Towns will only produce the various specialised troop types if you invest in new buildings. These buildings need more than gold to build, forcing you to explore for timber mills to provide the wood, mines to provide the stone and jewels and so on. The map is also peppered with various sites that improve the morale, luck and training of your heroes and their troops. Plus this game features magic (spells are found, or researched by increasing the size of your

Mage's Guild) and the actual combats are more interesting because you get to control some of the actions of your troops, making tactical level decisions that are not really in Warlords. Having said all that, there is less a sense of fighting a war in this game, it really does feel like you are in a lower scale conflict - there is almost an element of role-playing here as you embark on what really is an extended "strategic quest".

I've been playing the game using the Normal difficulty rating (this is the third weakest of four computer levels of game difficulty) and against non-customised opponents (they can be made even tougher using the Smart or Ingenious opponents options). These options provide for long term playability as even if I do finally manage to win the game, my score will be recorded with the lower difficulty rating and if I want to improve my standing on the High Score table I'll have to go up against tougher computer opponents. In the meantime, perhaps I should try the multi-player game versus some easier human opponents. Also available is network & modem play.

This is a good fun game for lovers of fantasy who enjoy mixing war and conquest with their magical adventures. The graphics and sound effects make playing a pleasure (listening to the clip-clop of horses hooves as your heroes travel is very entertaining), and with the challenge of victory still unattained I feel I'll be playing Heroes of M&M for many hours to come.

CYBERTECHNOLOGY

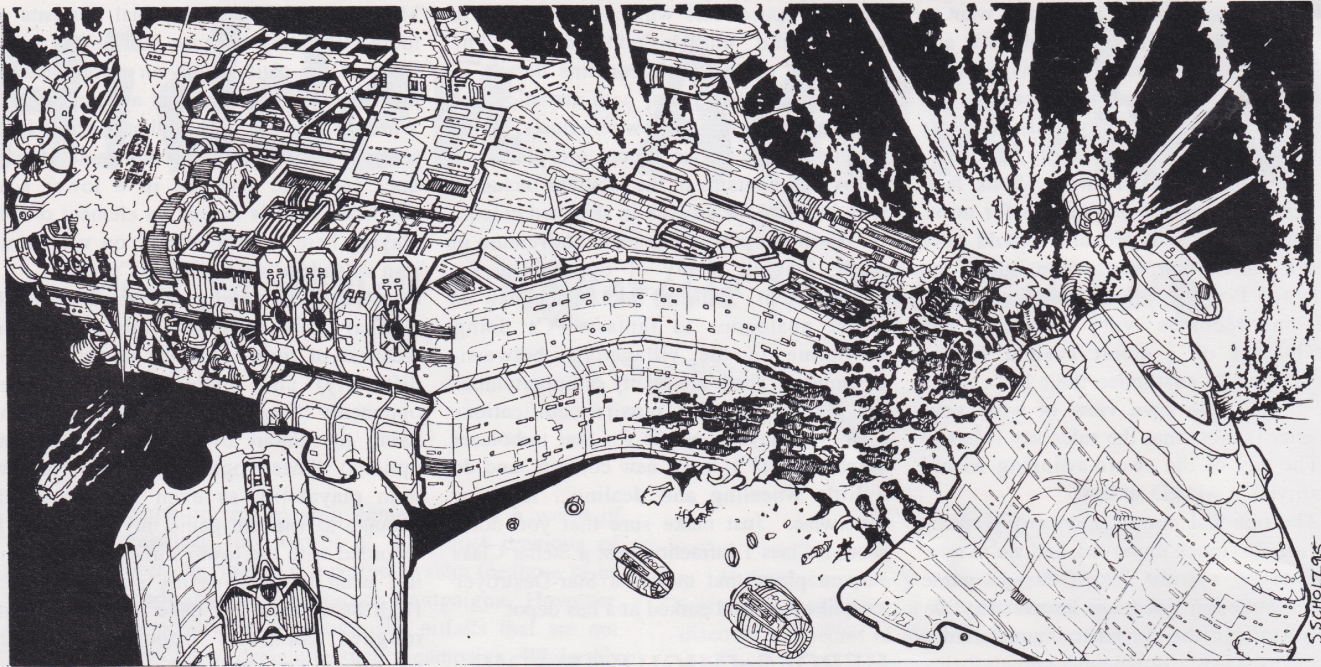
Shadowrun Sourcebook
FASA Corporation
Reviewed by Ron Fielding

A cyberpunk game wouldn't be cyber without the jacks, wires, chrome, and weird-tech gadgets to plug in and replace those all too fallible human body components with. Hang the social consequences - "Who was that dermal plated man?". The 102 page **Cybertechnology** book completely covers this dehumanising side of the Shadowrun game. And Shadowrun wouldn't be Shadowrun without magic, so they've also introduced a brand new kind of tech magic herein - *cybermagic* (is nothing sacred?). Add to this some new "not for players" archetypes, plus optional rules for 'running with cyberware and you have a very useful game aid indeed.

Art and text in this book are equally excellent, with generous doses of humour to sweeten what would otherwise be a bitter pill of rules about technology to swallow; the Shadowtalk is top notch.

Cybertechnology is a sound addition to every Shadowrun player's reference library.

Get wired. ■



OLYMPUS

MARTIAN CAMPAIGN SCENARIO HOOKS FOR SOLSPACE™

BY PAUL MITTING, LEE SHEPPARD & COLIN TABER

"The rape of the Martian environment cannot be allowed to go unpunished. Those of you that stand accused of this crime have been judged and found....guilty."

The sentence for your crimes is death. The execution of that sentence will take place immediately."

Message from Amanda Jacobs, Leader of Red Storm, to the citizens of Olympus, Mars.
13:00 Hrs - Nov 16 - 2037.

WELCOME TO MARS, DIRT-SNIFFERS.

The following feature has been written to provide both background information on the principal (and largest) Martian colony of Olympus, and a number of scenario hooks for GMs to get their players started in their own SolSpace campaign. Mars provides the best starting point for adventures in space - it'll have a major role to play in upcoming (*we're not telling you yet*) events, it's only a short Gateway trip to the Asteroid Belt, it provides in-built campaign hooks for a wide variety

of character roles (from solos to netrunners to eco-terrorists) and it boasts enough large cities to satisfy even the most agoraphobic edgerrunner.

SolSpace provides a fresh campaign setting for Cyberpunk™ fans. It's a whole new attitude out in the Dark, and your players will need to learn some hard lessons if they expect to survive long enough to make it in this very hostile environment. The scenario hooks provided in this feature are designed for that exact purpose - to push the realities of life in space in your players' faces. We've also thrown in a few long term adventure hooks, ones that'll give your players good reasons to hang around. Next issue will provide additional background information and adventure hooks for the other Martian colonies, as well as some clues as to the reason for the recent increase in terrorist activities by Red Storm, Red Sword and anyone else with an axe to grind.

Once you get your 'punks up into space, they won't be in any hurry to get back to Earth.

"IT'S NOT AT ALL LIKE THE BROCHURES..."

So how *do* you go about getting your players into space? Beginning a SolSpace campaign with completely new characters will be no problem. But some players, especially those whose characters have built up quite a reputation on Earth may be a little harder to convince. So what about some simple motivators to get you started?

The New Frontier - the new colonies opening up on Luna, Mars, Jupiter and in the Asteroid Belt are a bit like the 21st Century version of the Old West. A wealth of opportunity exists for the skilled solo, netrunner, nomad, cop, techie and/or corporate flunkie. So what if you've mortgaged yourself to the hilt to set up your first work/mining station? Word is you can make your money back in your first six months out in the Belt (as long as you can keep alive long enough to make it to the bank).

A Great Place to Hide - the players have finally bitten off more than they can handle, and really pissed off a *MAJOR* Corporation. Every second Solo on the planet now has their portrait, retina print and/or matrix identifier pinned to the side of his/her smart gun; the PCs' car/house/dog just got taken out by a mini-nuke; that secret half-million EB you had put away "for a rainy day" just got lifted by a Corporately-funded netrunner. Get the picture, choomba? Now might be a really good time to take that off-world trip you promised yourself. Not all of the Corporations have the same hold out in the Dark as they do on Earth (at least, not yet). S'gotta be safer than where you are now, hasn't it? (Conversely, the PCs could be the "hunters", and the trail they've been following suddenly takes a *significant* detour.)

Power Play - got a healthy hankering for some heavy firepower? Does the thought of slipping into a tight Assisted Combat Personnel Armour suit make your players go all squishy inside? No problem - join the RUK Space Marines ('ere we

OLYMPUS PRIME

The core of Olympus Prime is the huge multi-level building that was started 9 years ago as a large research station and fledgling colony. It has now expanded to a 20 level, kilometres across maze of mono-rail tubes, corridors, living quarters, malls, workshops and so on. An entire city jammed cheek by jowl.

Much of the core is separated into rough "national" boundaries. For example, the northern end of the core is RUK dominated, with many of their nationals living there. Other sectors are dominated by the Japanese, Americans, Europeans, Australians and so forth.

Lifestyles in Olympus Prime vary considerably. The wealthy and influential inhabit the upper levels, often with polarised windows showing the bright sky above. Mid levels are the domain of the minor executives, government officials, well-off workers and so forth. The lowest levels are the home of the factory workers, farm hands and miners. As you might expect, the deeper you go in Olympus, the harder life gets.

Around the almost orderly core of Olympus are the spokes, the monorail transport corridors mainly flanked by rammed-soil buildings and greenhouses. The gaps between these eight spokes is generally made up of more buildings and further out there are cheap pressure domes.

In the outer regions of the city are the various company and public landing pads for planes, airships and skimmers. About 5 kilometres out along the spokes, there is the ring rail that circles the city. Beyond them is the Olympus Fringe, a shanty city of cheap domes, bubbles and rammed-soil homes. Through this mess travels the main hub-line, providing the link between the farms, starport, manufactories and mining bases with the main city.

Martian Assembly: these new buildings are the grandest ever constructed on Mars. Built from a selection of Martian sands and minerals, the interior and exterior glow with a thousand hues (actually 87 according to the guide books) and visiting dignitaries and tourists alike are awed by it's lofty halls and spacious chambers. Despite it's grandiose design, the Assembly building can withstand external missile attacks and has a sophisticated security system layered throughout it's levels. The Martians feel a lot of pride in the seat of their Government, although Red Sword have called it "Rainbow Vomit" and openly declared their intent to blow it apart.

Embassy Buildings: all the major nations and corporations of Earth and Luna have embassy staff and offices located here. The upper levels are dedicated to the personal living quarters of the dignitaries and executives, with the mid levels housing the offices and reception rooms. At the bottom levels are the cramped quarters and workrooms of the junior staff and minor executives.

The Fringe: when you can't actually afford to live on Mars, but you find yourself here anyway, you live in the Olympus Fringe. Mars is not a world for those who are unemployed or work on the edge of society. Yet they have come to Mars anyway and need to live somewhere. This is where.

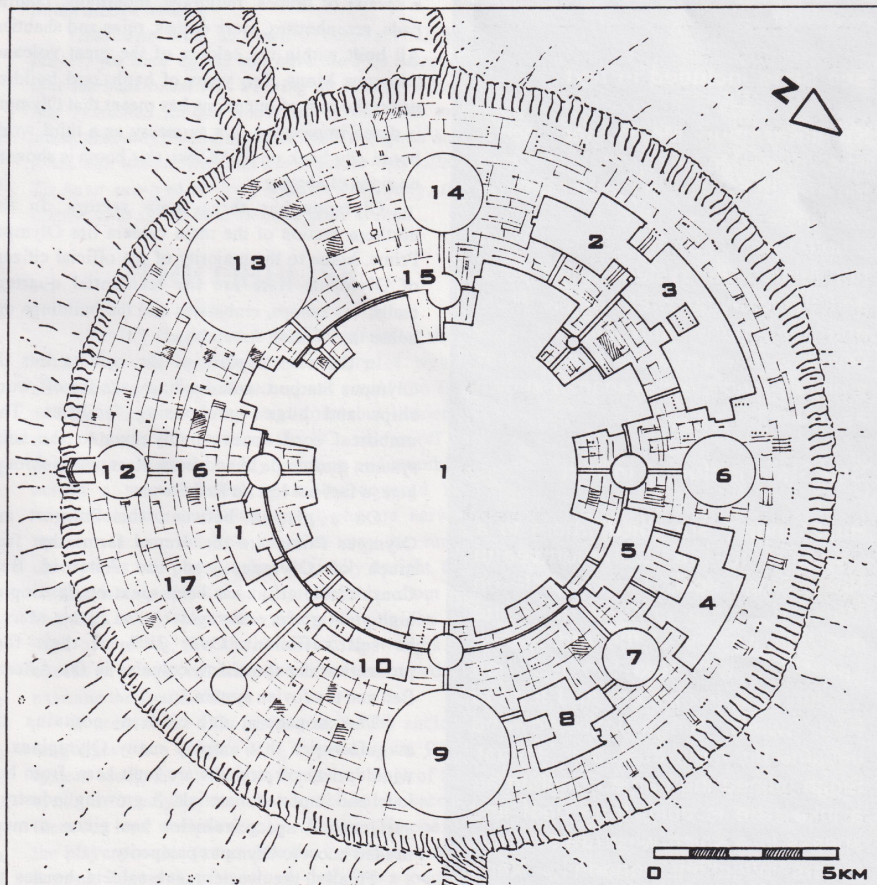
Unlike the core of Olympus, the Fringe has no central building to contain it. It is scattered between hundreds of small domes, houses, cheap malls and pressure tents. Linking them are cobbled together tubes, underground tunnels and even open walkways. Law enforcement is nearly non-existent in the Fringe. Death is often as not caused by a blowout during some shooting match as by the bullets themselves.

The Olympus Fringe is home to many of the renegade groups on Mars, and it is here that many of the new "recruits" are signed up. It is also in the Fringe where the first real face of Martian culture is being born. Its markets are legendary across Mars. As they say, if it isn't for sale in the Fringe, it hasn't been made yet.

In the Fringe, everyone still remembers The Blow Out of '35 where a cheap dome collapsed on the shanty, sending four hundred people flying into the poisonous Martian atmosphere. The authorities try and tell you that since then the Fringe has started to become a more regulated area. A lot of what they say about it still being rough and cut is hype. Sure it is. If you believe *anything* the suits say.

OLYMPUS PRIME

1. OLYMPUS PRIME CORE
2. MARTIAN ASSEMBLY
3. EMBASSY BUILDINGS
4. RUK SECTOR
5. COMMONWEALTH SECTOR
6. ISA DOME
7. ESA DOME
8. ESA SECTOR
9. NIPPON DOME
10. OLYMPUS HOSPITAL
11. JUSTICE BUILDING
12. MAIN LINE STATION
13. UN DOME
14. OLYMPUS HILTON
15. MONORAIL STATION
16. MONORAIL LINE
17. THE FRINGE



Key Players in Olympus:

Mayor Eunice Joyce: Mayor Joyce is the principal local official of Olympus. She rules the diverse city with a firm hand, and has frequently been denounced by the Martian Assembly and the media for her actions. Most famous for her speech against Red Sword, when she ordered the survivors of a terrorist strike team to be "evicted" from Olympus via the nearest airlock.

**Corporate (INT 7, COOL 6)
Oratory 9, Accting 5, Education 8**

Lazlo Jacques ("Three Eyes"): no-one dares call Mr Jacques "Three Eyes" to his face, or at least no-one alive has. He is the most powerful fixer in the Fringe, and by default in Olympus. His unusual name stems from his third cyberoptic eye fitted in the centre of his forehead. Why he has three eyes is a mystery, although he has been seen to have a cybernetic arm and speedware implants. Mr Jacques' influence extends through all levels of Olympus society. He can be visiting a wounded gunboy in the Fringe at noon and dining with the RUK ambassador that evening in the core.

See Stats included in text.

Kumi Kazamuri, Media Star: once a little known Media reporter, she had the luck to be working in the Belt on assignment when the Pirate War erupted two years ago. This earned her immediate system wide fame, and the undying wrath of the RUK and Commonwealth Navies. On Olympus, she produces and stars in a nightly media extravaganza known as "Kumi Live".

See Stats included in text.

Rajit Singh ("Songbird"): born to a Captain in the Commonwealth Navy, Singh spent his early life on Mars. He soon grew to love the desolate wastes of the red planet, and fell in with Red Storm. When Vokturi split from them and formed Red Sword, Singh followed and became his most trusted lieutenant. Singh gained the name Songbird as a joke - he is quite tone deaf and speaks in a voice which raises and lowers inflections randomly. None

go, 'ere we go...), travel to distant planets, see exotic spaceships, meet colourful interplanetary troublemakers and then blow the living CRAP out of all of them!!

Making a Difference - it may be too late to save the Earth (although there are those who still think the battle can be won), but we still have time to ensure we don't make the same mistakes in the rest of the Solar System. Whether you are part of the team that is determined to turn Mars into a green wonderland, or one of those willing to give your life to ensure that the planets stay as nature created them, one thing is for sure - it isn't being done right at the moment. In the rush to exploit mineral riches for a resource-starved home planet, or the hasty terraforming of a world that has yet to be proved completely dead, the same mistakes are being made all over again. It's time to put a stop to it, whatever it takes.

OLYMPUS

Location: Olympus Mons

Founded: 2028

Population: 1.5 million + 25,000 transients

Industries: Mineral Processing, Food, Textiles, Domes, Education, Government, Aerospace and Surface Vehicles.

Olympus, City of Dreams. Home to one and a half million people (officially - in reality around two million call this crowded pot home). It is often said: Mars is Olympus, and Olympus is Mars.

Olympus is a city growing at a tremendous rate. Just under a decade ago it was a European research station, all be it a pretty big one. Today it's a sprawl of domes, buildings, monorails, landing pads, greenhouses, more domes, ruins and shanties. All built within the caldera of the great volcano, Olympus Mons. Ten years of haphazard building under the best of intentions has meant that Olympus is damn impressive. It's as messy as a third world boom city back on Earth, but *this* boom is showing no signs of abating.

Olympus has three main sectors. In the northern section of the main caldera lies Olympus Prime, home to the majority of the official citizens of Olympus. Here are the residential quarters, malls, workshops, embassies and the buildings that house the Martian Assembly.

In the central plain of the caldera lies the Olympus Starport, with landing pads for off-world ships and huge warehousing facilities. This umbilical cord connects Olympus to the solar system; most trade to and from Mars passes through here, a fact not lost on Red Storm.

On a plateau between the Starport and Olympus Prime are the domed farms that feed much of Olympus and the Asteroid Belt. Considerable effort has been spent on developing high yield grains and vegetables to enable Mars to be self sufficient. Over 30% of their food production is exported to colonies in the Asteroid Belt and the Jovian system.

The southern sub-caldera contains the manufactories that employ many Olympians. A wide variety of products are built here, from both local and imported materials. A growing industry in surface and space vehicles has given a much needed boost to Olympus prosperity.

Finally, the western sub-caldera houses the

mining bases which tunnel deep into the heart of Olympus Mons. Much of the main caldera has mine tunnels and shafts running beneath it, but beneath the mining bases are literally thousands of kilometres of machine-drilled holes. Located here also are the water and air manufacturing plants which supply the majority of Olympus' needs.

WHILE YOU WERE AWAY...

A week is a long time in the Hyperspatial Realm...

As the PCs begin their journey into the Theodorsen Gateway (see *Postcard From Space* - Issue 24 for an idea of how the first stage of this journey might begin) they will have no idea of the coming hostilities on Mars. The day after the PCs' space vessel enters the Gateway to Mars, Amanda Jacobs makes her threat to the populace of Olympus through a simultaneous broadcast on all communications media (at least, the threat is *attributed* to Amanda Jacobs). Two minutes later, explosive devices are detonated at three separate locations - at one of the manufactories, the Olympus Starport and in one of the mining domes. In all, 37 people are killed, 173 injured.

UN Forces respond quickly. While the UN mandate restricts their actions (the events are largely considered an internal security problem at this stage, and thus beyond the direct involvement of the UN), they do have the power to intervene with force if there appears to be a serious threat to the welfare of the colony. As a consequence, UN Marshall Wong immediately institutes Operation Wind Chime. In a well-rehearsed military exercise, all essential life support facilities are secured within 30 minutes by UN forces (RUK troops, seconded under a standing agreement). With these vital objectives secured UN forces will take no further action unless attacked themselves, or at the direct request of the Martian Assembly. This last event is unlikely though, as failure to (internally) control this situation is sure to seriously affect any chances of Martian independence being granted.

Over the next three days more random terrorist attacks are made. The resulting panic quickly spreads to the fringe dwellers. They are rightly concerned for their safety, as hardly any of the buildings in the fringe have any safety measures fitted - if you blow a hole in one of these domes, there aren't any automatic sealing procedures, rescue teams or emergency EVAC suits to help you out. Within a day, riots are widespread, and internal security forces are forced to make a proactive (read *lethal*) response. Bad move.

SEE MARS AND DIE...

The first the player characters know about the trouble at Olympus (there has been, to this stage, a fairly successful media blackout over Olympus) is when the transport shuttle they are travelling in is hit by a surface-to-air missile! Unfortunately for the PCs, their shuttle has been chosen by a Red Sword strike team as today's target.

The shuttle shakes violently from the impact, and then all hell breaks loose. Alarms sound, lights flash, steam gushes and an annoyingly calm computer voice constantly broadcasts "Warning. Hull breach ... Complete atmosphere loss imminent ... Please evacuate immediately ... Warning. Hull..."

(GMs can add to the effect of this scenario by playing, at full volume, the "evacuation" scenes from either the *Alien* or *Aliens* movie in the background).

By now the players should be wishing that they had listened to your prelaunch safety talk. And while, like many airline stewardesses must do, you might feel a strong urge to just let them die, it's probably for the best if you let them make it to one of the escape pods. Doesn't mean you have to let them take all of their luggage (and its very important contents) with them though, does it?

The escape pod will come down somewhere near the manufactories in the southern sub-caldra. Unfortunately a rescue is not yet possible as the threat of further surface-to-air attacks has to be neutralised first (a task that is currently underway, after a surface scan from a RUK destroyer in near orbit). What a really bad time to get a pressure leak in the escape pod! ("Hey, shuttle companies have gotta save a few EBs here and there you know, and nobody expects one of these things to ever have to be used."). Time to put on those EVAC suits (with the 30 minute air supply) that came with the shuttle and make a break for the nearest airlock.

If the PCs take things easily by not running, or trying to carry too much extra equipment, they should make it to an entrance to the nearest manufactory with a couple of minutes of air to spare. If they indulge in strenuous activity, however, then their air is going to run out and there isn't any buddy breathing allowed in these conditions. To illustrate the point perhaps the shuttle also contained some other passengers, one of whom suffers for his desire to drag his heavy suitcase with him. Not a very pleasant way to go, but it serves as a valuable first lesson for the newbies.

MARTIAN ENQUIRER

After making it to the airlock, the PCs have their first encounter with Kumi Kazamuri who immediately shoves a microphone, strobe lights and holo-camera in the PCs' faces. "So how does it feel to be targeted by Red Sword? What do you know that has them scared? Is it true that you were seen with (insert male/female holostar's name here)?" Kumi is one aggressive media personality, used to getting her way and will bait the PCs until she gets a response ("The citizens of Olympus have a *right* to know what's going on!"). A violent response probably wouldn't be a good idea though, as Kumi is always attended by her own squad of well paid, highly skilled and very loyal bodyguards. So much for coming to Mars to hide...

Kumi Kazamuri, Media (INT 8, EMP 6)

Persuasion 5, Seduction 5, Interview 6, Credibility 4

Adventure Hook - having the news is worth nothing if no-one ever gets to see it. Influential as she is, Kumi is frustrated by the current media blackout, and would pay well to have her news vids smuggled out of Olympus. Be warned though, Kumi is being watched by more than her loyal fans.

Once the PCs have been processed, and any minor injuries seen to by med-techs, they are free to go about their business. If the PCs make any enquiries as to the return of their equipment they are advised that all cargo on the shuttle was completely destroyed, and that salvage of the

escape pods contents is regarded as an extremely low priority. Of course, the PCs are welcome to try a recovery mission on their own, but will find that someone has already beaten them to it.

Regardless of the reason for the PCs journeying to Mars, they will probably have to make their way to Olympus Prime. It is here, or in the surrounding fringe, that most of the PCs' contacts will be staying/made. The outer areas of Olympus are heavily geared towards industry, mining and transport, not accommodation and leisure. Besides, the characters might now be without any of their equipment, clothing and/or money. So unless the PCs have urgent business in one of the manufactories, farms, mines or the Starport, they should take the monorail to Olympus Prime.

If the characters were not afforded a view of Olympus as they made their way towards planet fall (no pun intended), they will get a pretty good look at it from the monorail as it travels the 50 kilometres from the manufactories to Olympus Prime. Regardless what the player characters might personally feel about it, Olympus Prime is still an impressive sight. (GMs are advised to think in terms of the movies *Blade Runner*, *Judge Dredd* and *Total Recall* when describing the central core of Olympus Prime). As the monorail stops at the various transit stations, the signs of obvious conflict can be brought to the PCs' attention. Separatist, cult and other graffiti is painted on the walls; internal security checks are frequent, with guards armed with both tasers and conventional (flechette, bolt-throwers, gyrojets) firearms; even recent blast damage can be seen being repaired. The passengers on the monorail also seem to be on edge, perhaps expecting an attack on the link or one of the monorails itself.

This thought proves somewhat prophetic, as the monorail suddenly pulls to a stop. Passengers are advised that the main line station to Olympus Prime has been closed due to a bomb threat, and that they have the option of waiting on the monorail, or making their own way through the Fringe. Many passengers take the second option, not wishing to be "sitting ducks" on the stationary monorail, and disembark to make their way through transit corridors to the fringe. (GMs - These sorts of diversions and inconveniences should occur often, at least while the unrest continues.)

STRANGE ACQUAINTANCE

While the PCs are making their way through the transit corridor, they are given a violent demonstration of what fringe living can do to an individual. One of the passengers from the monorail, a particularly anxious looking character, suddenly draws a flechette pistol and pumps four rounds into a very ordinary clerical worker, screaming hysterically "Get away from me you bastard! Stop following me! You're never gonna get me, you hear?"

He then turns his gun on the general crowd, not firing, but telling everyone to get back, yelling "You all want to know my secret, don't you? Well, I'm not going to tell any of you. It's my secret, and they want to kill me for it, but I'm not going to let them." Trained solos will realise that this guy has really lost it. He's probably juiced to the eyeballs with 'dorphs, and will shoot anyone who even looks the wrong way at him. Best to just give this whacko what he wants... room to get away.

the less, he has become a seasoned killer and enjoys his name for the irony it represents.

Solo (REF 11, COOL 9)
Combat Sense 8, Handgun 5

Commissioner Edward Fisk: head of the Olympus Security Forces, Fisk is responsible for all Police and Judicial functions. He was once a UN Marshall, but three years ago was offered the post of Olympus Security Commissioner and took it eagerly. Fisk is suspected to be involved with much of the illegal activity around Olympus and even Mars, not the least being drugs and gun-running. Unfortunately, anyone willing to testify against Fisk has met untimely deaths.

Cop (INT 5, COOL 4)
Authority 7, Interrogation 6

UN Marshall Linda Wong: most people expect UN Marshalls to be big, burly individuals. Linda Wong is a shade over 5 ft tall, lightly built (though athletic) and softly spoken. Except on the topic of Commissioner Fisk. Then she gets fired up, and you begin to realise the strength of purpose that has made her a worthy supporter of UN laws. Twice the Luna champion in Aikido, her transfer to Olympus was seen by some as a demotion. Not to Linda.

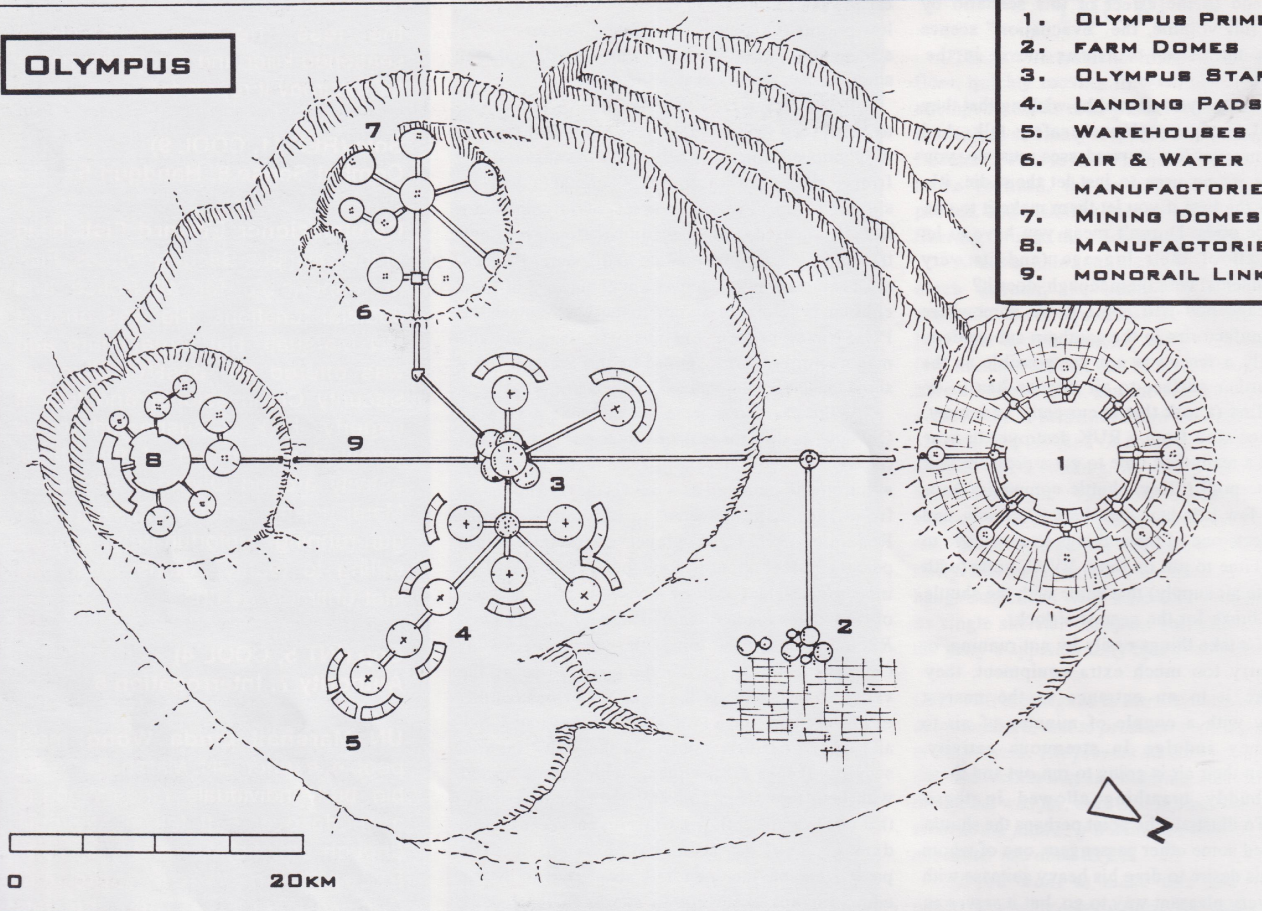
Cop (INT 9, EMP 8)
Authority 11, Martial Arts 6

Heinrik Schwarz, Warmaster: before he came to Mars, Heinrik was a Security Trooper with the ESA. He had come to Mars to explore a new frontier, but found the same old limits and rules holding him back. He had tried to find a way out, yet he felt that every move seemed to be countered by some damn law or restriction. His frustration lost him his job in Olympus, and he ended up in the Fringe. Then he met a Warmaster of the growing Mars cult, and quickly rose to being the Warmaster of a Fringe gang. He has over 50 disciples in his chapter, and regularly runs "jobs" for Three-Eyes.

Solo (REF 9, COOL 6)
Melee 7, SMG 4, Stealth 5

OLYMPUS

1. OLYMPUS PRIME
2. FARM DOMES
3. OLYMPUS STARPORT
4. LANDING PADS
5. WAREHOUSES
6. AIR & WATER
7. MANUFACTORIES
8. MINING DOMES
9. MANUFACTORIES
9. MONORAIL LINK



FACTIONS OF MARS

Red Storm: in the wake of the rush to terraform Mars can be found those who wish to keep the planet as it is, in its natural state. One of these groups is known as Red Storm.

A strong para-military organisation, the leadership believes the Martian environment should be kept as close as possible to its natural state. They actively oppose terraforming efforts, even going as far as terrorism. As the activities of the terraforming groups increase so too does Red Storm's actions. Every month the damage and the number of innocents killed gets higher and higher.

Red Storm is lead by Amanda Jacobs, a geologist who came to Mars and fell in love with its untouched beauty. She is extremely charismatic, having gathered around her hundreds of dedicated young men and women.

The Green Path: as much as Red Storm (and the splinter group Red Sword) want the surface kept as it was, Green Path want to bring it alive with plants, animals and a human-viable atmosphere. Their members mostly live in small communities where they develop new bacteria, algae, plants and insects that can survive in the thin Martian atmosphere. Naturally, they have supporters scattered throughout many of the corporate terraforming projects currently underway across the red planet.

While the membership is very passive, well equipped security teams can be found in

each domed community, a necessity due to the activities of Red Storm and some cells of Red Storm. Much of the funding for these facilities come from multinationals and government sources.

While no formal leadership structure is evident in the organisation, it is thought that Dawn Attenborough is the most well known and respected of Green Path members. She is often called upon to act as the (somewhat reluctant) spokeswoman for Green Path and its aims.

Red Sword: several years ago a splinter group based around an expelled Red Storm radical (Mario Vokturi) was formed. Red Sword advocates nothing less than the removal of all humanity from Mars, and works towards this end diligently. They are violent, unbalanced and completely unpredictable. Luckily for the settlements of Mars they are supposedly low on resources, and membership. Red Storm has often condemned their even more radical offspring, yet the ties between the two factions cannot be denied.

The Cult of Mars: as more of the young of Mars are disaffected by the emerging society (largely dominated by capitalist influences which praise mineral exploitation above all else) many are turning to radical groups and gangs. One such group is the Cult of Mars.

The followers of the cult have revived the worshipping of Mars, the god of war. Often seen in settlements clad in red armour and clothing, they carry the biggest guns their

money can buy, or their hands can steal. The cultists make vicious fighters, and half a dozen will bring down the best Solo.

Officially the cult is outlawed, but enforcing such laws is difficult in the resource stretched settlements of the surface. The biggest chapters are found in Olympus, especially active in the Fringe domes and malls.

Each chapter is lead by a Warmaster. This individual leads the group in daily prayers and can also act as a fixer for work for members, generally in the role of bodyguards.

Independent Mars: this is a loosely affiliated body of members from the many colonies, settlements, mines and cities on Mars. The group is a passive network which is working towards complete Martian independence. They were instrumental in the establishment of the Martian Assembly, the first step towards independence.

IM is non-violent in their approach, preferring negotiation to acts of revolution. This pacifist attitude has not earned them the respect of the more radical elements of Mars, but it has given them a willing ear amongst the Corps and Government embassies.

Recently IM has picked up more support with rumours of Terran governments looking at the possibilities of using their bases on Mars as a penal colony. As a follow on from this, elements of IM have been suspected of becoming militant and even talking about revolt.

Looks like the rumours were true...

Adventure Hook - it's only much later that the PCs discover that there is a Priority One alert out for this guy, with a substantial reward for his capture (alive) and presentation to the nearest RUK military installation. Have the PCs run into him again. After a suitably difficult chase and possibly violent confrontation, have them capture him. This guy remains desperate to escape, convinced that being handed over to the RUK is tantamount to getting the death penalty. Once he realises that escape is no longer possible though, he becomes resigned to his fate, and tells the PCs his story.

His name is Robert Cockington ("call me Cockeyed Bob"), and he used to be one of the best freelance netrunners that money could buy. Six months ago he was employed by a front-man for an unidentified corp (although he has strong reason to believe it was the IEC) to break into the "blue sky" section of the British Space Commission (BSC), the owners of the Gateway technology. He was instructed to extract any information that could assist in any "speculative investment" by his employer. Incredibly, and he still has no real idea how he did it, Cockington actually broke into the internal security grid for New Buckingham Palace. Before his intrusion was detected he had managed to copy some random computer files.

Upon later examination of those files, Cockington made a discovery that was to lead to his present status as the RUK's most wanted man. Regardless of how much the PCs cajole him however, he will not reveal what he found, stating that it is now the only bargaining chip he has left. His copies of the files are very well hidden and he hopes that he may be able to negotiate his release in exchange for them. He will not give the location of the copies to the PCs.

If the PCs hand Cockington over to the RUK, he is immediately whisked away by a Royal Marines security team (which is somewhat unusual, given that serving RUK troops on Olympus come from the British Combined Orbital Forces). Cockington has the last laugh on the "greedy" player characters, however. Just before the Royal Marines drag him away, Cockington yells to the PCs "Don't forget what I told you boys! Do you hear? It's all up to *you* now!" Quick thinking PCs should realise that Cockington has just dumped them right in it, especially when the security team Commander demands that the PCs also come in to "help us with our enquiries". Surprisingly though, it is Cockington himself who provides just enough of a distraction for the PCs to make a quick break for it (throwing himself at a couple of his guards), and the PCs should just get away (but feel free to wound one or two of them) amid a hail of flechette rounds. As they do so, they hear Cockington laughing hysterically, and screaming after them "Enjoy the chase, mates! Enjoy the chase!"

Robert Cockington, Netrunner (INT 8)

Interface 6, System Knowledge 10, Programming 7, Cyberdeck Design 9

The PCs now find *themselves* on the wanted list, and with a number of serious questions yet to be answered. Where are Cockington's copies of the information, and what's on them that's so important? How did Cockington get through to New Buckingham Palace, one of the most secure security grids in all of the Solar System? Why are the Royal Marines involved, and not just

conventional RUK forces? Who was his real employer, and what were they *really* after? And just how are the PCs going to get *out* of this mess?

MR FIX-IT

Eventually, the player characters are probably going to have to deal with Lazlo Jacques, or at least in the first instance, one of his employees. If they are wounded from their run-in with the RM Security Team, or need something that you just can't buy off the shelf, or just wish to hire out their particular skills, then Lazlo Jacques is the best one to see. Of course, unless the PCs have built up some serious street cred, it's more likely that for the first few deals at least, they'll probably just work through an intermediary. If they prove their worth (by completing assigned tasks, or making large, regular repayments) then they will eventually come to the attention of Lazlo himself.

Lazlo Jacques, Fixer (INT 9, COOL 7)

Resources 8, Intimidate 5, Streetdeal 6, Social 4

It would be fair to say that very little goes on in Olympus without Lazlo Jacques at least knowing about it, if not actually supplying both sides. To meet him is certainly unnerving, and not just because of his cyberoptic implant. He always manages to remain quite calm and composed, especially while ordering your execution. The last thing you ever want to hear him say is "That's very disappointing..." as it usually means it *really will* be the last thing you hear him (or anyone else) ever say. If you always do the right thing by Jacques however, then he can be one of the best contacts you could ever hope to make.

Lazlo no longer has any real need for monetary wealth per se, other than as a convenient means of doing business (ie he keeps a few million EB lying around for those that prefer such a "vulgar form of payment"). Lazlo much prefers to deal in power, information and social credit.

Rumour - "Hey, I heard from a contact of mine that "Three Eyes" has had more than an eye and an arm fixed, you know what I'm saying?" *Comment attributed to Zoltan Grimal, small-time fixer, just two hours before his disappearance.*

Campaign Hook - dealing with Lazlo could prove a gold mine of opportunity for the PCs. He is capable of providing the PCs with whatever they need, from weapons to security passes to backyard biosculpting. While his minions will most usually accept cash up front as payment for goods and services, Lazlo is more likely to demand "favours" in return for his personal help. Here are a few suggested jobs that the PCs could be asked to undertake as recompense.

Pick-Up - the PCs are given the co-ordinates of the next illegal weapons/drugs/cyberwear drop. Due in two days, the drop will be made in a nearby (200 kms distant) natural chasm. The PCs are provided with fake requisition and authorisation forms for a planetary skimmer, the Mars version of an AV-4. Their cover is that they are posing as a mining survey team. The mission should be a straight-in, straight-out pick up. Pity that nothing ever seems to go *that* easily...

Repo Men - someone has disappointed Mr Jacques, and you know how he feels about that.

The PCs are given a simple instruction - frag Jennifer Martin, a socialator at the ESA dome. She's fallen behind on her payments for the last time. Sad thing is, she's not only young and very beautiful, she borrowed the money to keep her 4 year old daughter in brain-dance in the Olympus medical facility while she had a serious condition corrected by nano-surgery. Jennifer's is a typical story in the colonies, and one the PCs are going to come across more and more often, the longer they continue to work for Lazlo. (It's guilt-trip time for your players, GMs.) Do the PCs do the dirty deed, or do they try to come to some other arrangement, and run the risk of "disappointing" Mr Jacques themselves? Who said life was easy in 2037?

All's Fair - if the PCs have a 'runner among them, they can be asked to try and break into the financial records of one of Lazlo Jacques's main competitors, April Shower, a Hong Kong born fixer with a strong connection to the Triads. Lazlo would like to know who her main supplier is, so that he can have a friendly word in the right ear (probably one of his RUK contacts) in the hope of having that supplier receive some unwelcome attention. Assuming the PCs are successful, then they could suddenly find themselves the target of some vengeful triad assassins, keen on a retributive strike against those who have dishonoured their leader.

Down Among the Dead Men - PCs who possess more technical skills could be tasked with trying to discover what's going on in Mine Shaft E31. Apparently, there was some sort of chemical spill down there, because the whole section of the mine has been designated a no-go area while it's being cleaned up. So why was an Arasaka bio-chemist spotted entering the mine with some Corporate big-wigs? Those Corp guys never leave Olympus Prime unless there's some monetary gain in the offing.

Mind you, the PCs could always just end up being employed by one of Lazlo Jacques's *rivals*, or operating even more "officially" - as a black-ops hit team. Just don't let any of the fringe dwellers find out who they're working for. Lazlo has many friends on Olympus. Powerful friends...

NEXT ISSUE...

We continue our coverage of Mars, with further background information on the other Martian colonies. And you think Olympus has its problems...

We'll also provide details on some of the other pivotal figures in the current unrest on Mars. You'll also get plenty of new scenario and campaign hooks for your own SolSpace players, this time centering on both the terrorist *and* terraforming groups.

See you in two months, Chombatta...

DARK NIGHT

Unae Short Fiction
by Mike Dunn

Steel shod hooves rang on stone. Sparks glittered in the darkness, blue pinpricks of fire struck from the unyielding rocks littering the mountain path. Fifty horses, sure footed and strong, thundered through the night carrying fifty Knights of the order Des Sankta Glavos to battle.

There was fire also in the minds of the riders; the fire of righteousness. Captain Silvagni, the leader of the fifty, felt a grim elation as he contemplated the battle ahead. Months of garrisoning churches and shrines, disciplining peasants and pursuing rumours of Ogres had left him frustrated, yearning for true combat. He had voiced no grievance, steadfastly obeying the dictates of the Benefice, finding solace in the knowledge he was doing the bidding of Krienta. Nevertheless, he had chafed at the tedious tasks allotted his riders. He felt no satisfaction at a young witch's screams as her soul was cleansed by fire, felt only annoyance as he cut down terrified serfs suspected of Kultism.

But then the stranger, a scout in the King's service, had come. He remembered the scarred, hawk-faced man arriving at the temple, demanding to see the Benefice. He had been tempted to run the man through for his insolence, but was sufficiently intrigued to escort him to the Benefice himself.

The news he brought was startling. He spoke of Kultists, hundreds of them, practising their vile arts in the hills east of Turaso. He told of abominable rituals enacted on the darkest nights, calling forth spirits of unutterable evil. Silvagni remembered the Benefice clutching convulsively at the holy symbol hung about his neck as the man spoke.

The Knights rode out that night. In the pale starlight, Silvagni could just see the dark shape of the scout on his horse, leading the way to the place where evil stained the purity of Krienta's world.



Jeras stood atop the keep, looking out into the night. A brisk wind ruffled his robes, the coarse fabric rough against his skin. Serra, the youngest of his disciples, stood shivering beside him.

"Why do they come, Master?" asked the youth through chattering teeth.

Jeras sighed deeply. "They come to destroy us, initiate Serra."

"Destroy us? But why? We harm no one, we do not interfere in their lives at all! What cause do they have?"

"They say we worship false gods. They claim our prayers bring forth demons, that our rituals are an insult to their own god."

"Demons? But our rituals are..."

"Do not seek to understand, Initiate," interrupted Jeras. It is best we remain ignorant of their thoughts, lest their insanity touch us also."

"So what should we do, Master?"

"We shall trust in our rituals, and the knowledge they bring. If we are to perish, then it is because we failed to understand the knowledge entrusted to us. We shall live if we are worthy."

He rested a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Go now. Call your brothers and sisters to the chapel. We must face our fate as one."

Serra bowed slightly and left, his bare feet making only the faintest shuffling on the dark stone steps.

Jeras looked again into the distance, searching for the faint twinkle of horseshoes sparking on the stony road. He found it, and guessed their number to be at least fifty. He felt no fear. He felt none of the confusion that so troubled his young follower. He felt only a deep sadness, a sorrow that once again violence had come into his peaceful world. He closed his eyes briefly, then turned and descended the stairs to prepare himself and his followers for their fate.



Silvagni reined in his mount, coming to a halt beside the scout. His knights pulled up around him, the hard panting of their tired horses competing with the whistle of the freshening wind.

"Their lair is five miles distant, Lord," said the scout, staring into the gloom. "This road leads directly to the gates."

Silvagni nodded curtly. "Best you leave us now, lest their evil taint your soul." He looked sharply at the scout. "None but the Knights of the Sacred Blade can look upon the Dark God's face and remain pure."

The scout bowed his head to the Captain. "I thank you, Lord. I am simply glad of this chance to serve our creator."

Silvagni gestured dismissively. "Go now." He turned his mount to face the assembled riders, drawing his sword and raising it high. "Fellow Knights! Saint Baimio rides with us this night! His messenger has led us to the place where darkness has overwhelmed His light!" He lowered his sword, gripping it mid-blade in a mailed fist. "Follow me now in the prayer of guidance."



Jeras looked sombrely upon his assembled disciples. Barely a hundred in number, he had known some of them longer than he could remember. He had overseen their initiation, led them through their lessons, watched them practise the rituals that would become their sacred trust. When the sun next rose, some of them would be gone, victims of the ignorance and fear of the outside world.

While they would be missed, their passing mattered little. The knowledge would endure. He raised his arms, gesturing the assembly to rise. They stood as one, eyes fixed upon him.

"The priest-soldiers of Krienta return," he began. "Again, we must trust in our faith. If we have been dedicated in our studies, if we have been diligent in our rituals, we shall endure." He lowered his arms, cast his gaze to the floor at his feet.

"Follow me now in the prayer of deliverance."



Rain began to fall, stinging Captain Silvagni's eyes. Distant lightning flickered across the sky. He heard no thunder, near deafened by the howl of the wind and the clatter of his troop's steeds at full gallop. Another bolt, much closer this time, split the heavens. In its light, Silvagni saw a dark shape, squat and square in the distance at the end of the white ribbon of road, less than a mile distant. The keep! He shouted triumphantly, spurring his already exhausted mount to greater effort. He began chanting the words of a protective prayer, aware, but not afraid of the power of the demonic magic of the Horned God's Kultists. The drumming of the hooves, the hiss of rain on his helm, the shouted words of prayer all blended into a hypnotic rhythm. The outside world faded, Silvagni seeing

nothing but the keep ahead, its dark form silhouetted against the sky. When lightning again briefly flashed, he saw the gates stood open. He shouted his thanks to his Saint, tearing his sword from its scabbard and brandishing it above him.

Blades flashing, the Knights rode through the gates into the keep, howling for the blood of their god's enemies.



As Jeras expected, the riders remained on their horses, not slowing until they were through the gates. They would be seriously hampered in the confines of the small courtyard. Somehow, he had expected better of Krienta's best warriors. He shook his head slightly in disappointment, then gave the signal to attack.



Silvagni dragged his mount to a sudden halt, looking about uncertainly. His riders milled about aimlessly in the tiny courtyard, a roiling, confused mass of men and beasts. The towering walls of the square keep blocked out even the dim starlight, the scene only lit for a heartbeat each time lightning bloomed. Other riders jostled against him, unable to manoeuvre in the cramped quarters. Righteous fury quickly fading, Silvagni realised he may have made a mistake.

A bell tolled. Silvagni looked about in surprise as the deep, resonant tone faded. Wary of a trap, he opened his mouth to shout an order when his horse gave a terrible scream of pain. He felt its legs give way and desperately dragged his feet clear of the stirrups as the animal crashed heavily to the ground. He scrambled upright, looking about wildly as agonised cries, human and animal, filled the air.

Lightning flashed. Silvagni struck out frantically, seeing a pike blade a hand's breadth from his face. He saw the wielder standing atop his dying horse, dressed only in a coarse hooded robe. Knowing he was looking upon the face of evil, he began chanting the words of the warding prayer, but stopped mid-word as the pike blade stabbed again at his face. He countered with effort, instinctively lunging at the attacker with his own blade. The pikeman stepped easily out of range. Before Silvagni realised he had missed, the pike struck at him again.

Only his years of experience kept the weapon from piercing his chest. Startled by the speed of the attack, he barely felt the cold blade slice into his shoulder as he tried to twist aside. His assailant threw his weight behind the weapon, driving Silvagni to the ground. Light filled the sky as he fell. Through pain-clouded eyes, he looked up at the face of the Kultist.

He had expected to see hate. He had expected to see features twisted by the insanity that worship of Dark Gods brought. He had not expected to see the face of a young girl, smiling serenely as she drove the pike blade through him and into the cold hard ground.



Jeras allowed himself a slight nod of approval. From his vantage point at a second storey window things appeared to be going well. The Glavos, in their polished breastplates, almost glowed in the dim starlight, while his dark robed disciples were but shadowy shapes in the chaos. While the Knights hacked and beat frantically at their attackers, his followers were calm, precise, wielding their arms with practised ease, always utterly in control.

Exactly as he had taught them. It filled him with deep satisfaction, not to see the unfortunate Knights die, but to see that the sacred knowledge was safe in the hands of his disciples.

Seeing that most of the armoured intruders had fallen, he stepped away from the window, turning to the stairs that led to the courtyard below.



Silvagni woke to pain, a pounding ache in his shoulder that drew an agonised groan from his lips. A thin drizzle drifted from the sky, running in rivulets from his helm. But for the muted rumble of the fading storm, there was silence.

The sight of the pike shaft, projecting from his shoulder like an odd limb, brought him back to reality. He blinked water from his eyes, then looked about him. Moonlight filtered weakly through the fast moving clouds, casting a pale glow over the courtyard.

He was surrounded by bodies. Some were the rag-robed Kultists. Most were armoured soldiers. He saw a horse nearby, neighing softly in distress, pushing anxiously at one of the bodies with its nose. Nothing else moved.

Fear for his own life competed with a growing realisation of the magnitude of the carnage surrounding him. A full troop, *his* troop, of Knights of the Sword had been wiped out. By a sect of half-mad Kultist savages! He snarled quietly, suddenly realising they must have used dark magicks against his warriors. There was no other way undisciplined Kultist scum could defeat Baimiopia's warrior elite.

The Benefice had to be warned. Left alone, their power would grow. More innocents would fall under the Dark God's shadow. He had heard whispers of the troubles in Ossard, and had no wish to see such chaos take root in the parish he was sworn to defend. Finding strength in the whispered words of the prayer of devotion, he carefully reached across his body, grasping the rain-slicked pike with his left hand. Eyes closed, he silently implored Krienta to give him strength, and pulled.

It did not move. Drained by the effort, he let his arm fall to his side, letting out his breath in a ragged gasp. Too exhausted even to think, he lay still, trying to ignore the burning in his shoulder.

"Hold him."

Silvagni's eyes snapped open. Dark figures surrounded him. Strong hands grabbed him, preventing the slightest movement. A tall figure stood beside his head, gripping the pike shaft low. Silvagni barely had time to realise what was happening, gritting his teeth as the figure straightened, wrenching the weapon from his shoulder.

He felt warm blood flow freely over his arm. He dimly heard the clatter of the pike being thrown to the ground, then the murmur of voices. He winced as pressure was applied to the wound, wondering what monstrous fate the Kultists were keeping him alive for.

"You led these warriors?"

There seemed no malice behind the question. He saw the speaker crouched beside him, a wizened man he guessed to be at least seventy.

"Kultist scum," he snarled. "Had you not ensorcelled my men, your head would be upon my lance."

The old man smiled slightly. "Anger clouds your judgement, warrior. We cast no ensorcellment upon you. We have no such power."

"No? How else could a pack of barefoot Kultist savages defeat us, armed only with..." He glanced at his shoulder. "With pointed sticks?"

"Again you blind yourself to truth," said the old man sadly. "The Sankta Glavos are not the only Order learned in the art of battle."

"So you worship Kave," growled Silvagni. "A lesser evil, but an evil nonetheless."

The old man sighed deeply. "You cannot hope to understand. We do not worship Kave. We do not worship battle. We are simply keepers of the ancient battle lore, knowledge passed down in the rituals and ceremonies we practise daily." He chuckled briefly. "Ours is a resilient Order. The knowledge we guard is most useful in thwarting attempts to destroy us, as your Order has discovered again."

Silvagni frowned. "Again? You have fought us before?"

"Indeed. Every few years, the Benefice of the time hears of us, and sends a troop of his lackeys to their deaths. A shame we must kill such capable soldiers."

Anger filled Silvagni. He struggled against the restraining hands, cursing and shouting. "No more! The Holy Benefice shall hear of this, and I shall lead a thousand men to this pit of evil!"

The old man heaved a deep sigh, shaking his head mournfully. "That cannot be allowed. The knowledge must endure."

"And how will you stop me, Kultist?"

The old man eyed him curiously, then stood and walked away into the darkness. Puzzled, Silvagni watched him leave.

Another Kultist, shrouded in a heavy cloak, appeared from nowhere and stood over him. Silvagni regarded him silently. He was surprised to find he felt no fear, only a vague annoyance at his own stupidity, both for leading his men to their deaths, and for thinking he might somehow survive this blackest night.

The Kultist threw off the cloak. He held an axe.



The scout bolted the door, then drew the heavy curtains after casting a furtive glance outside. Kicking off his mud-caked boots, he made his way to the back of his tiny cottage. He cast a hungry eye over the cheese on the kitchen table, but stayed his appetite. His was not a patient Master.

A rug in a corner concealed a heavy wooden trapdoor. He pulled it open with effort, turning away from the dank draught that emanated from the chamber below. He nodded slightly, seeing a flickering red glow casting dancing shadows across the floor. The flame still burned.

The ladder was slick with moisture, the hard packed soil cold beneath his feet. Insects scurried from his path, strange black creatures he saw nowhere but in the tiny hidden chamber. He ignored them, eyes fixed on the dark idol against the opposite wall.

He watched the tiny flame burning in its cupped hands as he knelt. It died almost to nothing, then flared suddenly, a terrible, mournful moaning filling the air. The familiar dread filled him, bringing with it the indescribable sense of presence, of being watched by some monstrous otherworldly power.

When the voice spoke, it was in a terrible whisper, barely audible yet impossible to ignore.

"Who calls me?"

"Your servant Segor, Lord."

"Speak, servant Segor."

He swallowed hard. "I bring news of the death of your enemies, Lord. A full troop of the White God's Holy warriors has died this day."

There was no reply. Segor felt a pang of fear, suddenly convinced he had offended his master. Moments later, his fears were put to rest.

"I feel their deaths." The flame flickered as if caught in the breath of some unseen entity. "Their blood will feed the flame. You used the monks again, servant Segor?"

"Yes, Lord. The local Benefice believed my tale as readily as his predecessor."

"The irony," breathed the voice. "It pleases me. Godless warriors, fighting the battles in our Holy war. But have a care, servant Segor. The monks would make dangerous enemies."

"I obey, Lord."

"As all will," whispered the terrible voice. "As all will." ■

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR METAHUMAN

Simple Character Creation Tips for Players of FASA's Shadowrun RPG

By Craig Sinclair

Many of us regret that great risk that we all have to take some time or another, when we decide to create a metahuman character. Sacrificing your top priority can often mean the difference between life and death (my last dwarf character found this out the hard way.) Hence, I have compiled a list of benefits that players can take advantage of, and traps that they should avoid, when choosing to play a metahuman character in the Shadowrun role-playing game.

I Am, Therefore I Think

Firstly; determine the character's overall purpose. Why are they here? What do they hope to achieve? An elf mage who is created merely for the sake of creating a metahuman character, with no real thought or strategy behind his/her existence, will invariably fall before getting established as a strong character in his/her own right. Sacrificing the top priority for race usually requires that the player will initially have to 'buddy up' with other characters within the party until they get a few adventures (and a few yen) under their belt. Only then can they hope to stand on their own unique merits and abilities.

Think about the role that you want the character to play before picking a race that suits that role best. This could mean an ork or a troll character for a party that requires more straight-up muscle, or an elf or dwarf character for a party that needs a more intellectual profession such as a mage or rigger. You'll need every advantage you can get when you're in the sprawl, so don't sacrifice your top priority for no good reason. You're really past the point of no return once you've put race up top, so think it through carefully, and make sure you know what you are letting yourself in for.

Beware of the attribute bonuses and penalties of each of the races. Though a troll may be stronger and tougher (and a lot bigger), they will be a lot slower and dumber, and may fail where an elf or dwarf would have survived. On the other hand, if you create a weak fighting character for a party that will invariably expect it to do a lot of hustling you may find that you suffer the same consequences. It all comes down to thinking things through before creating a character that will suit the purpose best.

Secondly; be careful what you put in your character's lowest priority, especially if you plan to have a mage. In this case you will have to work your way around some difficult problems involving money, skills or attributes. However, because race and magic will be your top two priorities, you will have to suss out the character's weaknesses and then place your priorities in a way that will hopefully minimise these problems. For example, a mage character who has little or no possessions will need resources in their third priority. Also, mages usually require resources for education and magical foci, so it will usually depend on the situation as to whether the mage's lowest priority is attributes or skills. However, this is only a hypothetical solution to the problem; a mage PC's generous father may own a huge corporation

in which case the character should have no problem acquiring the goods they need. (One may question the probability of such a character taking on the dangerous life of a shadowrunner, but anything is possible in character generation). It basically comes down to the situation that the character is in, and any behind the scenes help that they may consequently have.

Street samurai usually require attributes or skills in their top three priorities, and aren't totally fragged without much money. (Professional mugging is a lucrative profession in Seattle, but your GM may have other thoughts; so be careful). The main advantage of the street samurai is the fact that they usually have strength, fitness and reaction on their side in a battle. To comply with these ideals, they will need at least above average attributes, and good skills to allow them to develop into more efficient fighting (or should I say *killing*) machines.

Of course, resources are helpful. A street samurai with all the latest cyberware will have a distinct advantage over the street warrior who can't afford more than the clothes he wears. However, if your street samurai character has some strange fear of (or allergic reaction towards) cyberware, they no longer really require large amounts of money, and could possibly be better off with attributes or skills in the gap caused by this absence of a priority.

A rigger requires good attributes for a sound reaction score and agile work; and above average resources for the gear on which they entrust their lives, and the lives of the rest of the party. Imagine how angry you and the rest of your party would feel if your characters were all killed in an auto-duel because your rigger character couldn't afford an armoured car, and had to make do with



something less resilient. As with any non magic-using character, magic should be the bottom priority, unless you have an overly lenient gamemaster, and wish to make your adventures more of a challenge by disabling your character. Otherwise, you should try to take every advantage you can get.

The main concerns of a metahuman decker are those of resources and skills. Without enough money, they could find themselves doing runs on ten yen decks for the rest of their lives. Remember, the better your deck, the better performance you get while inside the matrix; and that could easily mean the difference between life and death for your decker.

Secondly; skills. Decking, computer theory (hardware) and computer theory (software) are all skills that your character will find invaluable and should be well educated in. Apart from this you will also need to provide them with basic survival skills such as martial arts, firearms and stealth. On the other hand however, a character may find that they have access to resources and education. In this case they will be able to put the attributes priority up higher, and will have access to more points for their required attributes. A good willpower score is very helpful, as you will be able to resist damage against intrusion countermeasures that exist inside the matrix system. It will also help the decker to be able to jack out faster when attacked by the dreaded black IC.

The Skill's the Thing

However; the road towards a successful metahuman can't be that hard, surely. The following is an outline of how to play your metahuman most effectively, including various strategies to make use of their many advantages, and lessen any disadvantages that may arise from playing them. Often all it takes is a thorough reading of the rulebook, and some common sense, to make the most of your character's many advantages.

Firstly, when generating your character, try to specialise in certain skills, especially weapon skills; for two reasons. They will give you a bonus amount of dice for that skill, which will help if your skills priority isn't so good, and metahumans (dwarves especially) may find that they can only use a few weapons because of size restrictions anyway. If you generate your character in enough detail, they may have certain weapon preferences, such as katanas or berettas, so take advantage of them.

Also, generate your attributes so that you will yield above average reaction ratings by allocating higher intelligence and quickness ratings. This will not only help riggers with their vehicle control, but will also boost the initiative score of any other profession. Depending on the character's profession, you should generate attributes that will give deckers more dice in their decking pools, wizards more dice in their magic pools, riggers more dice in their rigging pool, and so on. You have to think carefully to get every possible advantage you can for your characters, or they simply won't survive.

Next, to get the most out of your metahuman character, you'll have to use them in a way that is advantageous to your party, and not so good for your opposition. Use your character's abilities unscrupulously, to gain every possible advantage over your enemies. These abilities may include low light vision, increased attributes, bonus karma points, disease or poison resistance and so on. Determine exactly how much light your character can see in, this way you can turn a darkness advantage against a human opponent. Depending on your opponent's numbers, it is possible to use blitzkrieg (frontal assault) or guerrilla tactics to give your party even the slightest advantage over your opponents. Remember, every advantage is a necessity when you're trying to survive in the sprawl.



Didn't You Kill My Bruvver?

Apart from the big bonuses of playing metahumans, such as improved attributes, low-light vision and the like, which are rarely overlooked, there are other bonuses which can sometimes be missed in the rush of a battle. Against stubborn gamemasters you really have to scratch and bite to get your character bonuses recognised consistently, but that's fun anyway. These little things can really help you to survive, if you remember them.

Firstly, all metahumans get an extra point in their karma pool during character generation (however in the case of the *More Metahumans* rule this advantage is cancelled out). This can be particularly useful because it allows you to purchase new skills or attributes before even starting any adventures, while humans have to complete at least one adventure before having access to enough karma to make a purchase.

Secondly, because many metahumans, especially the less tolerated ones, hang around in groups or tribes, some of them may have the power to call upon their friends for help. Trust me, no one likes going up against a gang of trolls. Buddies, gangs and followers can be purchased during character generation by the same methods used in purchasing contacts and 'fixers'. One of the many street sayings I have discovered which is true in the Shadowrun game is, "you are who you know". Trust me, the character who has the contacts is the character who has the advantage over their enemies. Contacts and buddies can also help you as fencers to set up jobs and runs for you.

Although racism is supposedly on the decline, you may still encounter people who have a mortal hatred of those who are not humans, like members of the Humanis Policlub. "Filthy swine" you may say, but you will have to learn to live with them, as many GMs will throw armies of them against your metahumans. When encountering them, you may find that they do not have many extremely deadly warriors or mages, but their sheer numbers and horrific fanaticism make them dangerous enemies. They tend to hang around in gangs, and will generally have sufficient back up to get them through most battles. Often the best tactic is to walk (or run) away clean.

Metahuman Rights Activists may prove valuable allies for you against racism, although many of them prefer peaceful protest and not many of them will join you in arms just because someone called your ork character a "filthy dog". However, should they be with you when you come across a mob of Humanis Policlub Members, take cover, 'coz the fight ain't gonna be clean! True, they are mortal

enemies of the Humanis Policlub, but don't expect them to come running at your beck and call every time you come up against someone who is a racist. They have real jobs, remember? So don't take their help for granted, because they don't have as much strength as the Humanis Policlub Members, and won't be there for you whenever you need them.

When playing a dwarf character, hard terrain such as dense bushes or foliage, swampy land, hilly terrain or thin tracks can work to your advantage because of your character's smaller size. In this situation a dwarf who uses the correct guerrilla tactics can find many battles quite a lot easier than what they thought they would be. They can hide behind bushes, rocks, trees etc. far more effectively than their human (not to mention troll) counterparts. To help your character if you wish to make use of this strategy, you should create them with a good number of dice in their stealth skill. (Specialise in urban or farmland stealth if necessary).

High dice pool ratings, although not technically an advantage for metahumans only, can help you to survive when another character would not. To get high dice pool ratings, your character should preferably have attributes or skills (depending which affects the total) in the top three in their list of priorities. Street samurai should have high intelligence, willpower and quickness ratings, the higher these are, the more dice they will have in their combat pool. Deckers require a high computer skill to supplement their hacking pool, and magicians will need a good sorcery skill and (if possible) power foci to increase the value of their magic pool. Finally, riggers require a high reaction and vehicle control rigs to supplement their control pool. Keep these in mind when generating characters, and use dice pools to their full extent while playing your metahuman.

If you find that when you play metahumans, sacrificing your top priority is still too much, don't despair yet. You could suggest to the gamemaster the "More Metahumans" rule (Shadowrun II, p46). Although this rule means that you are only given one starting karma point instead of two, it is far outweighed by the fact that you can put race in your second priority instead of the top priority. This will allow you to choose another priority for your top spot. (You will still have a tricky choice for your bottom priority if you have a magic using character).

If you are desperately wanting to play a true metahuman shadowrunner, the key is, practice. Like all things, you can't expect to be a world champion in your first gaming session. The more metahuman characters you play, the more experience you're going to get with regard to playing them. If your characters are continually dying because of chancy dice rolls, don't be disheartened. You probably have either a sadistic gamemaster, or just plain bad luck. Sooner or later you will avoid both, and your character will begin to advance and become more proficient at surviving. So don't give up, just keep trying. Besides, isn't that the whole aim of a newborn character; survival? Let the other players take the risks until you become strong enough to take it out like the big guys. ■

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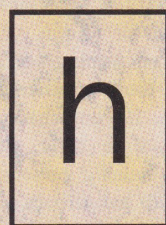
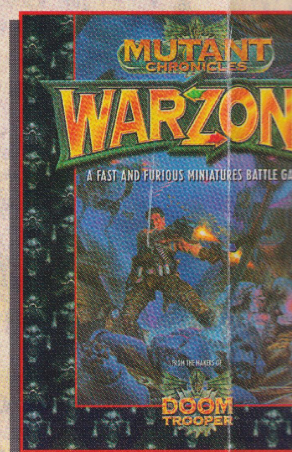
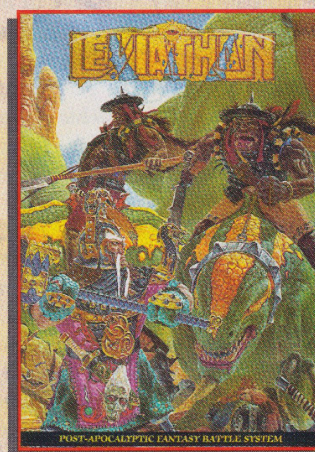
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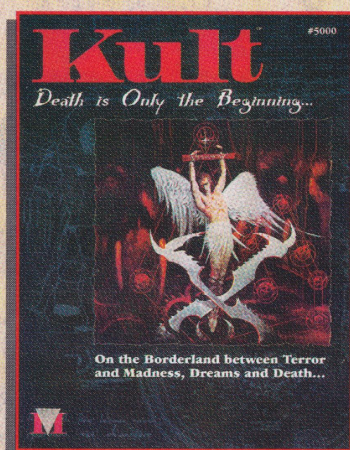
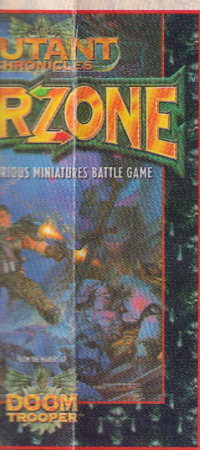
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WOMEN of the EAST

Written and Illustrated by Tonia Walden



Lady Hester Stanhope (1776-1839)

"Go out of England, I am determined"

Lady Hester Stanhope was the daughter of the eccentric socialist Lord Stanhope and the niece of William Pitt, the English Prime Minister of the time. Her father detested the London high

society life and was determined his children would have nothing to do with it, but Hester had other ideas and arranged elaborate ruses, so she could attend social events. Her unpretentious, high-spirited ways and clever wit made her many friends and she soon conquered the social scene.

Hester spent three happy years acting as William Pitt's hostess, as well as his informal adviser. This ended when Pitt and several other close to Hester died suddenly leaving her emotionally distraught and without a home. She had been granted a substantial royal pension for her services to the Prime Minister and she decided she would travel abroad as there was nothing left for her in England. In 1810, when she was thirty four, she left on a series of travels which would occupy the rest of her life.

She received passage on a frigate bound for Gibraltar, with a few servants, and Dr Meryon, who became her faithful companion on her adventures. She met a fellow traveller, Michael Bruce and it was soon apparent that they had fallen in love and they decided to travel together. Hester decided she wanted to travel to the Eastern city of Constantinople via Greece. This was an adventurous step, as few English travellers ever ventured as far as Turkey. It was an entirely different culture, but Lady Hester longed for new experiences and she was to receive these in abundance.

It was in Constantinople that Hester first met the Turks, for whom she had great respect. She began to socialise with them and even though she was an infidel and a woman they treated her with respect, probably because of her nobility and air of self-assurance.

Her party decided to travel to Egypt but this plan led to disaster as a vicious gale sprang up and they lost all their luggage in a shipwreck off Rhodes, and escaped in a lifeboat with only a few possessions. After their rescue, Lady Hester had no choice but to adopt the local dress - she did not want to dress like a Turkish woman, as this would mean she could not speak to the men, so she chose to dress in Turkish male costume.

Hester set off down the Nile where she met the ruler of Egypt, Mehemt Ali. She then set out for the Holy Lands (now Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel) which then were part of the vast Ottoman Empire that encompassed much of the Middle East in the nineteenth century. Hester departed into Syria with a camel train, where no European women had ventured before. Travelling there was not a simple task, as there were no established roads and all transport was by beasts of burden. There was also the danger of the brigands and tribesmen who lived near the mountain passes, waiting for the opportunity to raid travelling parties. This did not deter her and Hester began to learn Turkish and they visited the holy City of Jerusalem. The visit of a European lady caused great curiosity and a large crowd gathered to see her.

She headed for Damascus - the ruler there insisted she wear a veil in the Muslim custom and warned them that Christians were despised and they might be attacked. With typical spirit, Hester refused these conditions and made a grand entrance to the city on horseback, in her finest clothes. The crowds were amazed and let her

pass - they assumed she must be English royalty. She decided she would try to organise a visit to the ancient Syrian desert town of Palmyra. Only three Europeans had visited the mysterious city previously, and they had gone in disguise, and were lucky to escape with their lives. Hester could not resist the danger and legend of the place, and the myths she heard of Queen Zenobia, a former ruler of Palmyra, made her even more determined to visit.

This meant crossing twenty miles of desert, the domain of the nomadic Bedouin tribes. These tribes were a law unto themselves and they did not appreciate trespassers. The ruler of Damascus wanted to provide an escort for Hester, but the Bedouin leaders said they would attack any armed guards. The situation was resolved when the leader of one of the largest Bedouin tribes sent his son to offer Lady Hester safe passage to Palmyra. She was entranced by the fierce desert people who, despite their poverty, offered her hospitality. Her visit to the ancient city was not to be one of sneaking in and deception - she intended to enter in a grand manner and her spreading fame among the desert people, meant she was greeted by a large crowd of Arabs, who performed a mock battle in her honour. Once inside the city, the people put on a display of welcome for her and she truly felt she had been welcomed as "Queen of the Desert". She spent her time exploring the ruins and the ancient temple of the Sun. It seemed at this time she was perhaps one of the few people in the world who could travel the deserts of the Middle East, without fear of attack.

Things began to take a downward turn when they returned to Damascus, as they found it had been attacked by plague and they were forced to flee many towns to avoid it. Then Michael Bruce decided to return to England while Hester chose to remain in the Middle East. She realised that she would be considered an outcast by English society who judged her as being eccentric, mad and of loose character due to her independence and reckless nature. Sickness then struck Hester's party - she and Dr Meryon became grievously ill and did not recover for many months.

But she eventually recovered to set forth on more travels. Hester had become a woman of some influence, with contacts to most of the rulers of the Middle East - people started to approach her to influence the rulers on their behalf. She also organised a treasure hunt after finding an old manuscript but unfortunately did not find any gold.

People came to her for aid and advice, but her charity was another drain on her finances and she turned to moneylenders when her allowance was late in arriving - this was to be a mistake. In 1815

the faithful Dr Meryon returned to England.

In 1817 Hester decided to move to an old monastery at Dahr Djorn, to make more room for those seeking aid. She had it renovated and it was like a tiny village, surrounded by a large stone wall that could be guarded. She also created a garden within its walls, full of scented flowers and climbing plants.

Rival factions in Lebanon started fighting and Djorn was in the middle of it. Hester denounced one of the local rulers for his outstanding cruelty - not a wise move as he killed his enemies. The ruler tried to intimidate her, sometimes lying corpses at her gates and sending messengers with threats, but she refused to show any fear. She was now heavily in debt to the moneylenders, but she still managed to take in refugees.

War broke out when Egypt invaded Lebanon, and refugees flooded into Djorn seeking shelter. Although Djorn was surrounded by hostile troops, Lady Hester's reputation seemed enough to prevent any attack. Egypt soon ruled most of Lebanon, but Lady Hester refused to acknowledge the foreign power, and for six years continued to provide help - eventually the Bedouins and the Druse tribes drove the invaders out. By this time she was sixty years old. Unfortunately her pension from England was cut off and in 1839 she died at the age of sixty-three, alone and penniless.

Plot Hooks

Refuge

The party may stumble into unfamiliar territory and realise that the local tribesmen are anything but friendly and they may decide to take refuge in the mountains. There they find a lonely monastery occupied by a strange old lady - Hester in her later years. She offers them shelter and tells them that the tribesmen will not come here because they are afraid of attacking her. No doubt the party will be sceptical but will be surprised to realise she is telling the truth. Hester can tell them her story and suggest a way they can escape with the aid of her local friends.

The Horse Warriors

The party could be hired as Hester's escorts for her travels, which could lead to many encounter opportunities. One of the most exciting would probably be meeting the Bedouin tribes. Before the party heads into the desert, many terrifying rumours should be circulated about the ferocious horseman warriors and what they do to trespassers in their territory. When the party wake up one morning to find their camp surrounded, they should expect a large fight - however if they are brave and stand their ground, they will find the Bedouins will respect them for it and will be especially curious about Hester (and the party as well, if they are not natives). Instead of bloodshed they will find hospitality and realise they have made valuable new friends.

She Who Must Be Obeyed

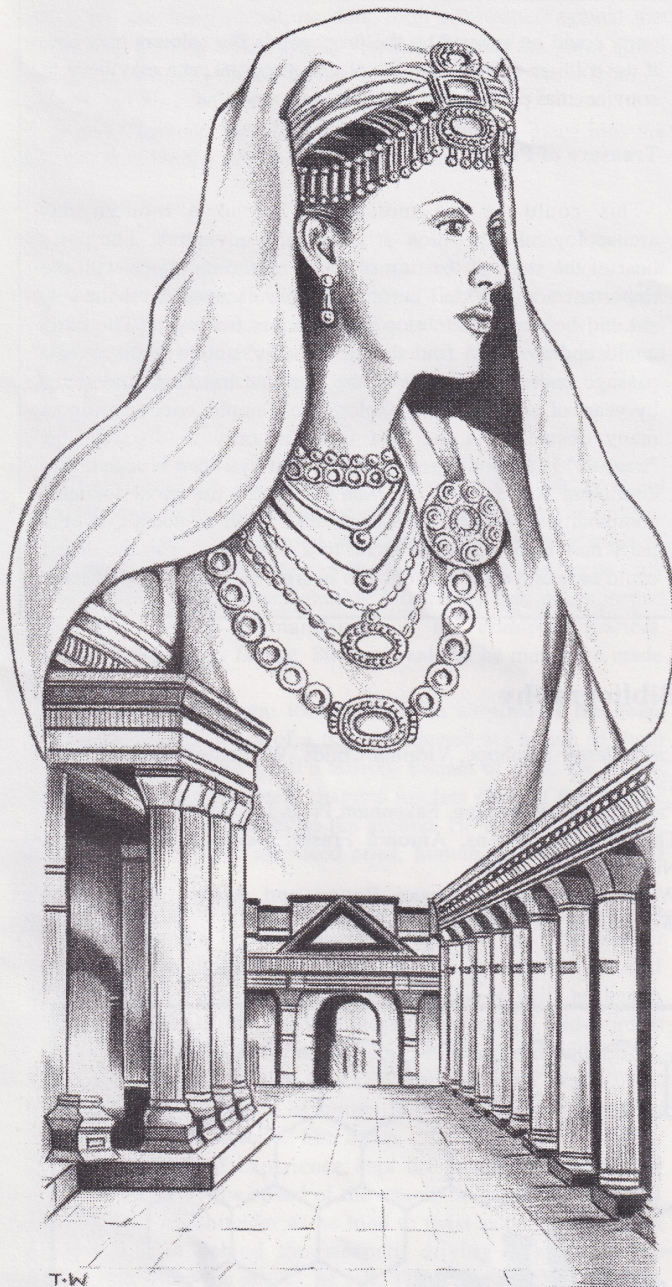
Hester had a habit of challenging local customs that she didn't agree with and when she heard of a monastery where nothing female was allowed to enter on pain of divine retribution, she forced a visit on the monastery, trampling over the monks' beliefs when nothing happened. If she has angered the wrong cult, by making them appear fools, they could be out for revenge - the party could get involved if they were in the cult, or if they were hired by them to attack Hester's party. Alternatively they could be hired by Hester as protection or perhaps to investigate the cult further.

Character Profile

Hester was a tall (nearly six foot) woman with dark blond hair, blue eyes and a rather prominent nose. She was clever and outspoken, with a wicked sense of humour, and she liked to tease those she considered pompous. However she was intolerant of faults in others and could be bossy at times - when angered she had a violent temper.

Her riding skills were very good and the ruler of Egypt was so impressed by her skills, he awarded her two Arabian stallions. She was particularly interested in Astrology and the beliefs of the East.

Hester wore Turkish dress which she admired for its "splendour and convenience". She dressed in the manner of a Turkish male with large and loose trousers, covered by a "burnooz" or white-hooded cloak with cashmere shawls as a turban.



Zenobia - Queen of Palmyra (240-300 AD)

*"It is not by writing but by arms, that the submission
you require from me can be obtained"*

- Zenobia, Queen of the East to Aurelian Augustus

Palmyra was a magnificent city in Syria, built at the site of an oasis. Around 114 AD it became part of the Roman Empire, but the city had considerable independence due to its distance from the Empire and it largely controlled its own affairs. It was built along an important caravan trade route which linked it to seaboard cities such as Egypt and to the inner distant eastern cities. The constant flow of caravans into the city meant that many different cultural influences also were absorbed by the people both in their arts and style of dress and religions. It also allowed them to grow rich on taxes from passing merchants.

Rome at this time was undergoing turmoil with unstable emperors and the constant threat to the Empire by the Gothic armies. Previously the trade city had relied on their Roman allies for protection, but the apparent weakness of Empire made Palmyra's ambitious King Odainat decide to strengthen his armies.

This was a wise move because the neighbouring Persians defeated the Roman legions and killed the Emperor. Odainat was obliged to take up arms against them and his troops defeated the Persian army and he proceeded to attack Syria. Then in 266 AD Odainat was killed, under mysterious circumstances. Whether Odainat's death was contrived by his family or Rome is unknown, but it suddenly gave Zenobia great power as her succeeding son was still only a child. Zenobia continued with her husband's conquests, seizing the whole Province of Syria. She then besieged and devastated Bosrah, the capital city of the Province of Arabia and it seemed her audacity knew no bounds as she advanced on Egypt. She had conquered it within a year and in AD 270, she looked towards Asia Minor. The Roman Empire was not in a position to stop her challenges against Syria and Egypt, but in a final insult to the Empire she declared herself independent of Rome and started to mint her own money and called her son Augustus, a term usually reserved for emperors - it was akin to a declaration of war against the Empire.

Unfortunately for Zenobia the Emperor at this time was Aurelian, who was a competent soldier and he offered Zenobia and her son the same rights and title as rulers of Palmyra as her husband had enjoyed. Zenobia was offended as she already considered herself ruler and certainly did not need the authority of Rome to take this title. Aurelian sent a general to reclaim Egypt and he himself achieved the reconquest of Asia Minor. Zenobia's armies fell one by one until he stood at the gates of Palmyra. Zenobia fled the city in order to beg aid from neighbouring cities but was captured when she attempted to cross the Euphrates river to reach Persia.

Aurelian spared both Zenobia and the city but Palmyra had lost its independence and a garrison was left to guard the city. Zenobia was led back to Rome where she was paraded in Aurelian's victory procession. Realising her predicament she pleaded immunity on the grounds of being "only-a-weak-woman" insisting others had acted on her behalf. This ploy worked as Aurelian was already embarrassed that a "mere woman" had caused the Empire such trouble. She was spared and allowed a villa and pension in Tivoli - though a few sources, probably wanting a more dramatic ending, say she was executed along with some of the leading citizens of Palmyra. However most evidence maintains that she adapted to Roman life and married a senator.

The end of the glory of Palmyra occurred only a few months later when the inhabitants of the city rose up and slaughtered the garrison. Aurelian returned but this time his armies ran amok in the city looting, destroying and killing. Palmyra did not recover from this onslaught and the civilisation passed away for ever.

Character Profile

Zenobia was of Arabian descent and was famous for her beauty, especially her large dark eyes and the impressive jewels she loved to wear. She was highly intelligent and gathered scholars to her court in Palmyra. She enjoyed outdoor pursuits, often accompanying her husband on hunting trips and preferred horseback travel, as opposed to using coaches. She was manipulative and courageous, with a powerful ambition and but her behaviour could also imply recklessness.

Plot Hooks

Palmyra - Jewel of the Desert

The oasis city could be used as a setting in a campaign with a Middle Eastern flavour (for example TSR's *Al-Qadim* or even Unae's Evoran homeland). The characters could meet a caravan and be told it is heading to the city of Palmyra, which is the nexus of many trade routes. The city at the time of Zenobia should be depicted as very rich and grand with much diversity in people, religion and arts. As many scholars and artists travelled to the city it could be a meeting point for many unusual NPCs. Try to "culture shock" the players a little - have strange and never before heard of religions, exotic people and bizarre, grandiose arts and styles of dress.

War Criminal

The party could be contacted by a woman who wants them to act as bodyguards, who tells them she fears for her life. She has an exotic appearance and they notice in her house there are many strange and beautiful ornaments, which make them think she is traveller from another land. The party could continue to have adventures acting on her behalf, until one day a strange ship lands in port bearing unfamiliar markings. This ship sends their employer into a panic and she insists she must flee. With some investigation, the party can find out the ship is full of soldiers who are searching for a deposed ruler - Zenobia, their patron. She is to be taken back and made an example of for daring to stand up to their armies. They are offering a reward which leaves the party with a choice - do they turn her in or do they try to help her escape from the other bounty hunters. The

party could be swayed by the propaganda the soldiers may use. If the soldiers accuse Zenobia of war atrocities, she may have to convince the party that the accusations are false.

Treasure of Palmyra

This could be the motivation behind a modern day archaeological expedition or a dungeon adventure. The party hear of the story of the ruin of Palmyra and its queen with the important addition that before Zenobia escaped from the city she hid her treasure to stop the invaders finding it. The party could endeavour to find the ruined city, and will discover a passage under the Temple of the Sun that has been uncovered by years of erosion. They explore the Temple, encountering as many obstacles as the GM sees fit, only to discover the "treasure" is an underground spring that has been blocked, thus depriving the oasis of its water - surely the most valuable commodity in a desert. This might be a bit of a letdown, but the party may realise that the secret to a water source in the desert could be worth a lot of money to nearby towns or landowners.

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THE GRIM FOREST OF MASABOR

by Mitting, Sheppard and Whitt

Mathan skittered down the mountainside, the rattle of scree stones ringing in his ears, and the excited whoops of his surviving companions following behind him. Exhausted and suffering a half dozen minor wounds, still Mathan felt good. Good to be outside the accursed Halls of Hra Kurban and into the light at last.

And surely they had shaken off the orcish pursuit. But where were they? His memory of the maps of the east end of the Hra Kurban road were uncertain. Pausing to allow his mates to catch up, Mathan surveyed the country ahead. A remnant of the paved dwarven road led down the slopes and plunged under the eaves of a sprawling forest. The thick canopy of the trees hid the further progress of the road. Beyond the forest, almost invisible to any but an elf's eyes, was the far plain and distant ocean. A city might be on that coast. With no better alternatives, he decided to follow the road.

All too soon, the adventurers were out of the light again, and into the cool darkness of the Grim Forest of Masabor...

THE ROAD GOES ON

In issue 22 we embarked on an experiment wherein three writers were invited to share in the design of a classic dungeon adventure. Each designer was encouraged to follow his own style both in presentation and tone, and to explain the ideas and inspiration behind each particular style.

Judging by the huge positive reaction to *The Lonely Halls of Hra Kurban* our readers found the chatty tone and varied ideas of this adventure/how to presentation very useful and entertaining. So we've decided to expand on it, this time taking the adventure out into another classic adventure setting - the forest.

We hope you'll once again write and tell us what you think of *The Grim Forest of Masabor*.

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

The old dwarven trading road of Hra Kurban deposited the player characters on the east face of a mountain. Originally they thought they could make out a town one day's march to the east. That proved to be a false hope... the town a deserted ruin. Instead, the way forward appears to be fixed to an uncertain path through a dense forest (see map on page 32).

Masabor has only earned its reputation for evil in the past two hundred years. Prior to that, the busy trade route that spilled out of Hra Kurban supported a number of forest communities including a substantial elven presence. Cooperation between dwarves, elves, and men tamed the forest and a network of small towns sprang up along the eastward road. The largest of these settlements, a human town called Masberg used to exist in the sheltered valley at the heart of the forest. It is said, by those few locals (mostly orcs) who still inhabit the forest, that foul witchcraft and demonic worship perverted the folks of Masberg and led to its ruin even before the Hra Kurban silver ran out and choked the life out of the trade route.

Players may have heard some of the rumours:

WHISPERS & RUMOURS

ORCS & PORK: Sigmund Stuhl of Nagrand swears by his regiments of orc boar riders. The force of their charge often breaks a battle open in his favour. Amongst orc tribes it is well known that Stuhl pays boar riders handsomely; and he doesn't seem to mind if a bit of gratuitous rapine is visited on the vanquished after a victory. Many forest dwelling orc tribes engage in breeding programs to supply the necessary mounts for this troop type. It's said that such a piggery exists in Masabor.

SUNKEN SILVER: At its height, Hra Kurban delivered some of the largest and purest shipments of silver ever dug out of the ground. These refined deposits were loaded onto huge wains and shipped east under heavy armed guard. Inevitably bandits tried to intercept them. It is rumoured that one of the biggest ever shipments was taken by a daring band of brigands led by Roy of Teltham. Roy led the stolen wains off the road and into the swamps in the middle of the forest. His triumph was short-lived however, as the heavily laden wagons all sank into the mire. Roy and his men tried without success to raise their booty from the mud, several drowning in the attempt. Legend says Roy's men haunt the site.

MAGIC MUSHROOMS: Orc shamans have long known the secrets of communicating with the spirit world; narcotics. In Masabor it is said that there is a mushroom of potency, Mother's Milk, described in cabalist tomes as having a skinny stalk and nipple-shaped head, its colours vary with the prevailing moisture; wet, they are dark brown and in the dry they're buff coloured. These mushrooms are of great value to magicians and seekers of arcane knowledge, and fetch a pretty price in specialised markets. Untrained collectors must beware, however, as another mushroom that masquerades as Mother's Milk, the Hoarstool, is quite deadly.

ADAM: *Players enjoy being informed about their adventuring environment; gives them a sense of*

control. And handing out rumours is a great way to generate plots without lots of preparation on your part. Watch as the players snap up the morsels of data you toss at them, every nibble will be munched and crunched until it becomes a three course meal - and you are just the person to serve it back to them, with some very hot sauce!

SIGHT, SOUND, SMELL

Forests are wondrous environments. Any referee can search their thesaurus for a hundreds of words to plant in their descriptions to create visual images redolent with that special sylvan atmosphere. But the amazing thing about forests is how all the five senses are delighted. Why not look at recreating that extravaganza of sensation? There are numerous New Age CDs available now that feature forest sounds (insect and bird song, running water and soothing music) and many aromatic oils reproduce the scents of the forest. Add to this some green filtered light in your playing area, maybe even a house plant or two, and your players will be immersed in the setting even before you open your mouth to narrate your story of this journey through the Grim Forest.

If you are using mood music, see if you can dub it onto tape so that you can mix up the tones. Undercurrents of tension can be added with strings, and climatic moments can be scored with percussive sounds. If this is all too much work, simply wait until the players have all settled ready for the session, whack on The Cure's ditty, *The Forest*, very loud, as an intro track. Then play.

BOAR WAR

The player characters enter a section of the forest distinguished by few trees but many dense thickets. The way ahead is choked with brambles, the old road almost obliterated. Through this area they notice several wide broken trails in the undergrowth, and then they come across unusually large muddy cloven hoof prints by a watercourse. A huge pile of steaming spoor is up ahead.

Smart players with bush survival or tracking skill will deduce that they have unwisely wandered into the territory of a large cloven-hoofed animal, and they'd best make good speed to leave the area. Unfortunately for them the beast's run is extensive and inevitably they'll disturb one of his mates and her litter. These will squeal hysterically and the boar will respond...

...the breeze carries the weirdly inappropriate sound of wind charms to the players' confused ears. As they wonder at this noise, their reverie is disturbed by great guttural snufflings, the heavy cracking of brush, then the awesome sight of a 600 pound, jet black war boar with spiked collar and flaring nostrils bearing down on them at speed.

ADAM: *Don't neglect to make these sounds and gestures real for your players. Snort and puff, flare your nostrils and get up close to your players, right in their faces. Porgo is a mean mother well capable of killing a character or three, but you want the players to get away so place a heavy emphasis on his appearance. Much of Porgo's effect is pure theatre. Ham it up.*

Porgo is a pig of the war boar genus, porky killing machines bred for their great size, strength, intelligence and ferocity by the Masabor Orcs who

also use them as mounts. Porgo was an especially large and smart boar inducted into the service of the head shaman of the Black Dog tribe. He retired himself from this onerous duty several months ago, killing his master and a half dozen retainers to make good his escape. Since then Porgo has roamed the thickets in the western skirt of the forest, defeating the three previous wild boar claimants to the territory and rounding up a harem of females. He fiercely defends his domain, harem and their piglet litters. Porgo especially hates orcs, but will not hesitate to attack persons of any race he sees as potential threats to his new lifestyle.

Porgo is an impressive and worrying sight. His head features multiple piercing - ears, nose, eye-lids and bloated cheeks are all adorned with the various charms and tokens of the orc shaman's trade. These trinkets rattle and chink as Porgo barges his way through the dense undergrowth of his territory. His huge and deadly tusks are carved with the arcane scribing of the shamans who enhanced the killing power of his attack beast with the Foul Rune of Wounding (see below for effects).

The boar is further decorated where a wide section of bristles shaved from its back has left a swathe of exposed skin which is elaborately tattooed with the markings of the Black Dog Orc tribe. These tattoos have no magical powers, but do hold strong totemic significance for orcs.

About Porgo's powerfully muscled neck is a plain iron ring adorned with spikes. This collar is suffering from exposure to the elements and is slowly rotting away; russet streaks stain the boar about the shoulders, chest and forelegs, irritating the pig no end. The collar is the one thing that the boar hates even more than people and although it is saying too much to say Porgo would look kindly on anyone who'd help him remove it, at the least he'd cut them enough slack to escape his presence alive.

ADAM: *It might just be possible to interact with Porgo. He is almost smart enough to communicate with. Offering to remove the rusting spiked collar would be a good place to start. I leave it up to you and your players as to how they manage to communicate their good intentions to a seriously aggressive boar.*

FOUL RUNE OF WOUNDING

This is a magic device inscribed on weapons by shamans of the Orc Tribes in these parts. Any person wounded by this weapon may be afflicted (use a percentage chance or saving throw in tune with the poison rules of your preferred game system) by a wicked seeping infection that quickly turns to gangrene unless magically healed. This gangrene results in the permanent loss of body parts and a reduction in the total health/hit points of the affected character at a rate of 10% of their total health/hit points per week. Eventually the character rots away and is no more.

Simply copying the rune onto weapons is not sufficient to enchant the rune. There is a long

elaborate ceremony to be performed which culminates in the carving of the rune, and the empowering of the weapon. This disgusting rite features vile offerings to the Orc Spirit Lords and is a close-guarded secret of the shamans who perform it. The effects can be permanently ensorcelled with the aid of an appropriate (higher animal) sacrifice.



COMIC RELIEF

ADAM: *Sometimes I just can't help myself, I have to play a joke on my players even in the most tensely plotted adventure. Here is an example that I used one April Fool's Day.*

Over a period of a day or two, the players keep catching fleeting glimpses of a lithe female figure running through the trees. Close observation reveals that the figure is that of a pretty young woman in torn rags. She has been keeping pace with the party for some time, but keeping her distance. Any attempts to approach her will spook her, but she will soon return to watch the players once again. From the haunted look in her doe-like eyes it appears she is a Nell-like wild orphan abandoned to the forests and wary of all civilised contact.

Compassionate players (is that what they call an oxymoron?) will eventually be able to gently entice the girl into their camp. The girl is extremely shy and embarrassed about her condition and struggles to communicate with them, happy to confirm whatever theory they raise as to how she came to be a lone denizen of the Grim Forest.

ADAM: *If your players are like mine you'll find it very difficult to convince them to even talk to a lone figure wandering the wilds. They have a healthy fear of anything that appears out of the ordinary. Sometimes you just have to appeal to their better nature, if you can find it, by laying things on thick. It's your adventure and you can cry if you want to.*

The girl will now tag along with the party. That night she will sleep in a borrowed bed roll away from the fire. Long after the moon rises the camp is awakened by the anguished scream of one of the party members. His/her neck is a wide gash of flowing blood. The camp is in uproar as a wild deer suddenly springs over the camp fire and bolts into the night.

The victim recalls nothing except waking in agony with the weeping eyes of a deer, its muzzle dripping blood, looking down at them. A check reveals that the girl has gone. Her bedroll is cold.

If the players pursue the deer, they will find it too swift in the dark for them to bring down with arrows, but they can track it. They find it in a clearing, sweating and exhausted from the chase. As they cautiously approach the wild beast, they are stunned to see it make a transformation into the form of the lost girl. Naked and helpless (only the most callous adventurers would attack her now), but with the blood of her victim still staining her quivering mouth, the girl will turn to the party with a sorrowful look in her eyes and haltingly explain:

"I'm so sorry about this, but you see, I'm just a little were-doe."

ADAM: *If the players don't laugh at this you are in big trouble!*

GOBLINS ON PARADE

The old trade route now begins to ascend into a region of wooded ridges and low-lying hills. The birds here are less raucous and the general atmosphere becomes quieter, the players tense up with the uneasy sensation of being watched. Certain tree clumps and boulder formations seem to recur every few hundred yards. Then the road crosses a ridge and enters a narrow defile with sheer cliff walls on either side. As they enter this canyon a weight crashes onto the road behind them. What had been a tree above the pass turns out to be a prepared logfall. From either side of the pass come the ululating cries of a horde of forest dwelling goblins. It is obvious that they want one thing only from the player characters - blood!

ADAM: *These pesky forest elementals clearly outnumber the characters. The only option is for the PCs to run before they are stoned to death. Ahead there appears to be a narrow escape route. Fling rocks, faeces and timber at the fleeing characters, but don't allow the pursuit to follow beyond the far edge of the pass where Lee awaits them!*

LEE: *With wilderness adventures, I like to consider a single issue before planning any encounters. Is the wilderness setting just the location of the planned encounter (ie a hidden ruin), or is the wilderness setting the actual encounter itself? If the former, then the encounters/hazards will be largely passive and natural; the PCs survival or destruction will largely depend on how they plan for and react to their surroundings. If the latter, then the encounters will be far more specifically planned and aggressive, with encounters designed to use the location to the greatest advantage. My contribution to this How To/Scenario displays elements of both.*

I have always wanted to do an adventure set in a swamp location, and this scenario gives me the opportunity to put some ideas to the test. Obviously, space restrictions limit the scope somewhat, so my preferred tactic of providing lots of mood and scene setting description (I'm usually a very visual GM, using lots of maps and pictures to assist in play - even if they don't get published, Hey Nick!) has had to take a back seat.

Specific inspirations for these encounters come from such diverse sources as JRR Tolkien's The Hobbit (Mirkwood), a number of comics (Ripley's Believe It Or Not; Namor, the Submariner), and my own experiences wandering through WA's south west with a magazine Editor last year.

THE FOREST VALLEY

The adventurers are now well into the forest, but the sounds of pursuit can still be heard and, it would seem, not too far distant. For a moment, the party might almost think that they may have already reached the other side of the forest, for the trees suddenly thin out, but sadly, this is not the case. The land merely dips, quite steeply, into a valley, the tops of trees clearly visible from this vantage point. The other end of the valley can be seen rising approximately five miles away, with the forest apparently still continuing on from there.

The party could certainly walk around the valley, but this would certainly double the distance they would have to travel and so, begrudgingly, they slowly make their way down the steep slope and into the valley below. As they do so though, they cannot help but feel a certain uneasiness, as if something was watching their progress.

LEE: *All of the following encounters take place within this hidden valley, itself located entirely within the bounds of the surrounding forest. It allows GMs to arrange a sudden, dramatic change in environment, further adding to the players' troubles.*

Getting the PCs to descend into the valley should be a relatively simple task, as from their initial vantage point, all looks pretty much the same as already passed. If the players need a little push, have their pursuers, who/whatever they may be (after Adam's last efforts in The Lonely Halls, the PCs could be being chased by giant Gummi Bears at this stage for all I know...) catch up to the party and force them to take the "easier" option and strike out into the valley. What the players don't know of course is that the tree tops hide a particularly nasty swamp, all set to suck the PCs to their dooms...

The idea for this valley setting comes from my most recent viewing (I like to watch it about once or twice a year) of the movie Predator, one of my all time favourite Arnie flicks.



THE RUIN

The PCs scramble their way down to the valley floor, quickly moving forward into the trees in an attempt to elude their pursuers (but strangely, all pursuit has suddenly stopped, as if those chasing the PCs don't want to come into the valley). As the PCs move forward, the trees become more tightly packed, and visibility drops as a result of less light filtering through the thick upper foliage.

About a mile into the valley, the air becomes much warmer, the humidity also rising quite markedly. Boots squelch as the ground beneath the PCs' feet becomes moist, and a mist forms. It is a few minutes before the PCs realise that the trees have all turned grey, and the sun is now blocked by a thick fog, as these trees now bear little foliage.

Moving on, the PCs come across the remains of a small stone building, its surviving walls now no higher than 2 feet. The building adjoins the edge of what appears to be a greenish coloured lake, its full size hidden by the thick fog. Just within sight, about thirty feet into the lake, a lichen covered gibbet hangs suspended from a mouldy wooden structure, its single skeletal occupant seemingly grinning at the party's apparent folly by entering the valley.

LEE: *This is designed to introduce a sudden change in atmosphere, and to produce a sense of uneasiness in the players. The players do not ever have to know the real reason why the building was built, or what the gibbet was for, only that it possibly bodes ill for them in the future. If it achieves that effect, then the encounter has done its job.*

If you want to make this and subsequent encounters more atmospheric for role-playing - as the PCs begin to move into the valley gradually dim the lights, then turn up the heat in the room (make 'em sweat) and start to speak more softly, so that they all have to come in closer, adding to the oppressive feeling. Try and get the players to limit their conversation only to actual role-playing, so that all that can be heard is the vivid description you are plying them with, and their own breathing.

THE LAIR OF THE MUD-BEAST

There are no clues as to the reason for the building or the gibbet, all traces of previous occupants long since rotted or washed away. This is particularly unfortunate for the PCs, as this entire swamp is inherently "evil" in nature, a grim legacy of the execution of every member of a witches' coven some 100 years earlier.

Over two dozen witches were tortured, then drowned on this spot, their leader hung in the gibbet to die of exposure and starvation, to serve as a warning to others. With her dying breath, she placed a vile curse on this place, her hatred giving it power. Since then, all who've met a similar fate within the bounds of the lake have not died, but been reanimated by the evil power of the swamp, their bodies covered with a thick sludge of mud, slime and rotting vegetation, and with an insatiable desire for the taste of flesh and warm blood. One (or more, depending on the relative strength of the party) of these mud-beasts is now actively stalking the PCs through the valley, intent on a horrid feast...

Should a PC test the depth of the "lake", he/she will discover that it is only actually two feet deep, and so the party can still choose to move straight on,

should they wish to avoid a long detour around the lake. Whichever direction the PCs eventually head, a few minutes after leaving the ruined building, an alert PC (LEE: *select a player - pass a note*) will hear a strange noise coming from the centre of the lake, as if something big were making its way slowly towards the party. It's a sucking sound, as if large feet were being pulled from the muddy bottom of the lake as it moves ever closer. If that player alerts the others, and the whole group listens - they detect no such noise. (LEE: *Just introducing a bit of healthy paranoia for one player - heh, heh!*)

Eventually, a *different* player will then begin to see a shape at the very edge of the fog, or even occasionally darting between two trees, but once again, all efforts to bring it to the attention of the others meets with failure. (LEE: *That's now two on the edge of their seats.*)

If the party has any NPCs, or better yet, a pack animal, have them/it drop back for a moment, or break it's reins and run terrified into the fog. A few moments later, the most unholy scream is heard, accompanied by thrashing water and a sudden crunch, before all is terribly quiet. A search will only find a disturbance in the ground or water - and a terrible smear of mud, slime and blood.

LEE: *And that now makes the whole group wetting their pants. The key to this encounter is to stretch it for all it's worth. Having the PCs detect the creature only one at a time slowly adds to the tension, while the horrible death of the NPC/pack animal only serves to confirm that they are in BIG trouble.*

Remember, if the players spend any time within the swamp, any characters or NPCs that are killed can also be quickly reanimated, perhaps still bearing some identifiable features to add to the horror of the encounter. OK, now you've got them on edge - it's time to make them run...

THINK OR THWIM

The PCs are now aware that they are being followed by something, and it doesn't have their best interests in mind. They may decide that discretion is the better part of valour, and make a run for it. If this is the case, then let them thrash through the swamp - the noise will only help to cover the approach of the mud-beast(s). Try and add as much confusion to the situation as possible, with the PCs even becoming lost or separated if they don't bother to take adequate precautions.

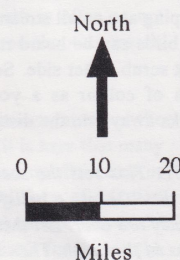
This section of the swamp is also filled with sink holes - areas where the ground has simply rotted away, leaving deep pockets of water and quicksand. Not the best sort of place to go running through in heavy armour now is it? You may wish to allow the PC a quick cry for help, or slow his/her initial descent into a watery grave, and this is quite reasonable - I feel that players should always be given a chance of rescue unless they have continually played in a careless or stupid manner with their characters, for to do any less is to quickly lead to major GM/player conflict.

Once the PCs have had a number of close encounters, and/or hasty rescues, and are near exhaustion - hit them with the mud-beast!!! In the single mud-beast scenario, the creature stands some 10 feet tall (originally an ogre that drowned in the lake), is roughly humanoid in shape, but covered with mud, twigs, slime and blood. Two red, inhuman eyes stare at the players, and an open maw drips



GRIM FOREST OF MASABOR

- A. Hra Kurban
- B. Porgo's Thickets
- C. Goblin Hills
- D. Swamps
- E. Woodman's Cottage
- F. Bandit Bridge
- G. Black Dog Orcs



slime. In the multiple mud-beast scenario, the creatures can be of varying size, but none should really be larger than man size.

LEE: *Time for the players to see what they've been worrying about. This creature should be one tough mother, with survivors of the encounter having quite a tale to tell. If the players decided not to run, and make a stand somewhere in the swamp, then have the mud beast appear literally under their feet (if they are in the swamp proper) or simply crash through the fog and into them, shrugging off any initial missile attacks.*

GMs who wish to reward their successful players for their efforts can have the PCs discover that the mud-beast was wearing an amulet, which had remained hidden under all of the mud and slime, probably belonging to the beast's original host form, and undetected until the creature was killed. To have survived so long without tarnishing, the amulet must surely be something quite special...

THE OBELISK

Allowing themselves a brief respite after their battle with the mud-beast, the party of weary adventurers rest for a time and eat a cold (no fire will light in these damp conditions) but welcome meal. Shortly after, one of the PCs moves off to perform a necessary bodily function and stumbles across a stone obelisk, partially covered by vegetation and mud. Strange glyphs are carved upon it, a combination of what may be runic inscriptions and pictographs. Originally upright, the obelisk is a slender 2-foot square column, about 20 feet high. Only three sides of the column can be seen at present, for the whole thing weighs in excess of a ton, meaning it cannot be turned to examine the fourth side.

If none of the PCs has any skill with ancient languages (or a similar skill, depending on RPG system used), they will have to take rubbings of the symbols, or rely on someone to accurately record them for later deciphering by an expert. If one of the players is able to translate the inscriptions, then it would appear that the column describes a journey

of some sort, probably a brief version of the history of a race of people now probably long dead. They must once have been beings of great power however, for some of the pictographs hint at terrible weapons, potent magic and much in the way of riches.

What clever PCs may also notice is that, intermingled within the runes and pictographs, are recognisable geographical symbols (mountains, rivers etc) - hinting that the column might also act as a form of map. Unfortunately, the PCs only have three quarters of the map, for the remainder lies under one ton of obelisk - bummer huh?

LEE: *Obviously, the provided explanation is only one of many that could be used by GMs to stir the interest/greed of his/her players. In this case, I have provided just enough information to warrant further investigation, should the PCs be interested, but without overtaxing myself by developing a full and complete racial history that may never be required (never trust your players to take the bait - only create something when it's really needed).*

It could also prove amusing to watch the PCs have to consider returning to the forest and facing its many dangers once again, just so that they can get the rest of the map, once they have the original three sides translated in the next city, and the true worth of their chance discovery comes to light.

This encounter is inspired by an episode of Gilligan's Island (the greatest sitcom of all time).

AN END AT LAST?

After their ordeals within the accursed valley, the PCs are particularly happy to see the steep rise that signifies the end of this part of their journey through Masabor. As they slowly make their way up the slope that will lead them back into the forest proper, the PCs may begin to wonder what else this place can throw at them. If only they knew.

LEE: *By now, the player characters should be bloody, muddy and almost completely exhausted - just where you want them. OK Paul, I've softened them up for you - now finish 'em off...*

PAUL: *For my section, I have drawn on situations I've used in the past. Added to this are inspirations from movies and books, especially those of David Gemmel. Like Gemmel, I like my adventures to have lots of combat and the chance to act heroically. I confess to not being a great one for storytelling, so my players tend to find themselves running from one bloody encounter to another.*

The forest has been slowly thinning in places, where the occasional fallen tree has left a clearing, filled only with soft grasses and young saplings. More often now the adventurers stumble across game trails, which can lead them easily along their path for a few miles, before petering out or stopping at a small stream. Sounds of small animals and birds can be heard moving in the trees and the thick scrub either side. Sometimes, you see a quick flash of colour as a young deer is startled and breaks away into the distance.

PAUL: *This sets the scene of the idyllic forest, to lure the PCs into a belief that the nasty bits of their journey are over. Let them hunt or look for healing herbs as they wish. Then lead into the next scene...*

The party stumbles into a bigger clearing than those before. Stunned by the sudden light, their eyes adjust to the sight of over a dozen tree stumps, already showing signs of regrowth around them. The work of an axe in skilled hands is evident. A simple trail leads further down the slope.

THE WOODCUTTER

As the trail is followed, the sounds of the forest diminish. Ahead can be heard the rhythmic thump of axe against wood. Approaching, the adventurers can see another clearing, in which a muscular man, stripped to the waist, is wielding a large axe against a tall tree. As they watch, he delivers one mighty swing, sending wood chips flying. He stands back, and with a large groan and screech of cracking wood, the tree topples towards the players.

PAUL: *If you wish, have the tree be 50 to 100 metres tall, and as it crashes down, make the players try and jump to safety. No-one should be killed, although a nasty gash or two, or even a broken bone, should make them wish they were quicker on their toes.*

Whether he hurt them or not, the woodcutter rushes over and offers his apologies. He is Henri Le Hayes he announces, and he appears to be about 40 years old, with tanned leathery skin, a handsome face, and a peppered beard and hair. The more astute players will note a number of long healed scars on his forearms and sides.

Henri explains that he has worked the forest alone for so many years now that he rarely calls out a warning when he drops a tree. He will offer any first aid (he is moderately skilled in this) if needed. Since the day is hot, he then invites the party back to his cabin for cool drinks and fresh honey cakes.

On the way to Henri's cabin he will comment on how few people travel the forest these days, and ask where they are bound. He is not prying, he simply seems to be an amiable fellow happy to have company to talk with. His cabin is a modest two storey affair, solidly built of rough hewn timber with a stone chimney. Beside the cabin is a small workshop, containing a forge, anvil and grindstone.

Inside, the cabin is simply furnished with handmade furniture. A ladder leads up to second floor sleeping areas. Along the walls are a variety of hand and throwing axes, as well as a large double bladed war axe. All are well maintained and show signs of past usage. Henri will fuss around the adventurers and see them all settled onto comfortable chairs and benches, prepare cold drinks and set out freshly baked cakes. He will also offer smokeweed from a small personal supply.

Henri will press for news of the outer world. Players will soon realise he has not left his woodland home for a number of years. During the day (he will try and keep them as long as possible) he will make subtle references to his boy/girl Marc/Marie. He has taken a shine to one of the players, and comments on how much like his son/daughter they are. When asked where the child is, his eyes will become shadowed and his voice will quiet. He will explain that one day he/she went into the woods to fetch berries and did not return. His mood will then lighten again, and he will focus on the selected character a little more intensely.

At either noon or dusk, he will offer the characters some of his wild deer stew. He'll press them to eat with him, and the meal will be excellent, with homebrew beer to wash it down. Once the meal is completed, he offers the party some of his leftover stew to take with them. He will explain that hunting in the area is scarcer than it used to be.

PAUL: *Henri is, of course, quite mad. His son/daughter was killed by dragon wolves five summers ago, and he had lost his wife three before that. Henri killed the pack that slew his child using the war axe on the wall. It was from that battle, and his earlier soldiering, that he gained his scars. He has come to the belief that the adventurer is his child come back to him, despite any evidence to the contrary. He has doped the stew he gives the party with a powerful sleep drug and will follow them through the forest 'til they camp.*

The parting from Henri will be full of smiles and calls to come back soon. He gifts the party with his stew, some healing poultices, a skin of mead and directions on the shortest way out of the forest. From here, the players will find themselves on an old logging road. It is overgrown and winding, but is much easier travelling than the forest. Once they set up camp, they will (hopefully) eat the stew provided by Henri. The sleep drug is a powerful one and no-one will be able to resist falling asleep. Once asleep, Henri will move in from where he has been shadowing the party and bind the selected player. The rest he will leave untouched. He will depart the way he has come, travelling quickly through the forest on a path far shorter than the one the party has followed. His trail will be soon lost, even to an experienced tracker.

PAUL: *At this point, the GM must decide whether to let the players awake about 8 hours later, or have them attacked by something while they are asleep. An option is to have the Dragon Wolf pack find them and drag one of the players off. Imagine their surprise at awakening to find themselves being nibbled by a Dragon Wolf. In either case, the party will be troubled by terrible nausea and vomiting - a side effect of the drug. It will last for about 1 day, and will reduce any skills by -1/-10%. The vomiting can be stopped by appropriate use of Herbalism, but the nausea and skill reduction remain until it lapses.*

Henri has holed himself up in his cabin. He has dropped into a complete fantasy where he thinks he has just rescued his child from the Dragon Wolves while they were attacking him/her. He believes that his child is delirious after the attack, so he has tied them securely to their bed. Henri knows of the danger from the creatures' bites, so regularly bathes the player on the bed, as well as administering a foul tasting curative.

PAUL: *Play scenes with Henri and his captive like those from Misery or any of a number of kidnap/psycho movies. Henri will be gentle but firm in his handling of the player, unless they anger him with refusal to play their role as his son/daughter...*

When (or if) the party returns to the cabin, they will find it tightly shuttered. It is now they realise how solid a structure it is (Henri reinforced it after the raid of Dragon Wolves which took his wife). Any attempt to break in through the walls or windows will be very difficult. Henri will speak to the players through the door and demand they leave him and his child alone. He has no wish to harm them, but if they persist he will take up his war axe.

PAUL: *Henri will be difficult to starve out, as his cabin has an internal well and food safe. The cabin is stoutly built, but persistent attacks or even burning will bring him out. If so, he will be wearing an old but serviceable shirt of mail, steel forearm bracers and greaves and a leather cap. He will be wielding Raven Feeder, his war axe. He is well skilled in the use of the weapon and can deliver ferocious blows with it. Have him split a shield with one blow, that sort of thing. His dementia is in full hold, and he believes the players to be Dragon Wolves. Ultimately, Henri is not evil. He is just a tragic figure tormented by the deaths of his family. Any player who treats him with compassion because of that deserves bonus game rewards.*

THE DRAGON WOLVES

These denizens of the forest edges are large reptilian creatures who have fur pelts upon their backs. Their snouts are like that of a large lizard (such as the Komodo dragon), with 4 powerful clawed feet. A long scaled tail ends in a tuft of fur as well. In colouration, males tend to have pale brown fur and mottled grey/brown scales. The females have pale brown fur as well, but their scales are a brown only.

Dragon Wolves are a pack hunter, usually living in family groups of 1 dominant male, 3 to 4 young males, and about 10 young and mature females. They live by scavenging and hunting, preferring to let their meat rot a few days before eating it. This gives them a fierce case of bad breath, as well as a bite which quickly causes blood poisoning and gangrene if not treated properly.

PAUL: *These babies are here to remind the players of the "natural" hazards of a forest, and to let the GM have another hackfest. The dominant male should be 2-3 times the toughness of an average warrior, with two bite attacks per round. The young males will be 1-2 times as tough as an average warrior, as are the females. Modify the strength and size of the attacking pack based on the strength of the party when encountered; the idea is not to overrun and eat the whole party - a desperate and bloody fight for survival will suffice.*

Their preferred method of hunting is for the females and most of the young males to wait downwind of the prey. The dominant male and one or two young males then move up behind the prey. In a rushing attack, the males deliver blood curdling roars and run towards the prey. Typically, the prey run away from the attackers and into the waiting jaws of the hidden pack. If the prey stand and fight, the males will go in first, with the females circling to prevent any escapes. Killing the leader, or 25% of its numbers, will make the pack flee.

PAUL: *The Dragon Wolves can be encountered either when the party are asleep from the drugged stew, or when they run afoul of the hunting pack. Any horses travelling with the party will become edgy as they pick up the scent of the males behind. When the males roar and rush forward, horses or pack animals will try and bolt away.*

THE BANDITS

PAUL: *Every forest needs some bandits or brigands. This band are a ruthless bunch, but the GM can moderate their actions against the players however he/she likes. They could be heroic freedom fighters bent on overthrowing the local baron, or just outright killers who will rape, loot and pillage at the drop of a hat. Your choice.*

Once again the party has stumbled across the remnants of the great road which used to pass through Masabor. This section is overgrown but passable, and with each mile travelled it becomes easier to move along. The road turns a bend to reveal a deep ravine with a stone bridge across it. On the near side the bridge entry is covered by an old toll gate, with a large 2 storey fortified house beside it. In a ramshackle pen near the forest edge are stabled a dozen horses.

Even if the party are quick and try to duck back out of sight, they will be spotted by a watcher atop the crenelated roof. An armed band of men will quickly appear at the gate and hail the party to stop. They are dressed in worn leather and steel cap, and carry either a pitted halberd or sword and buckler. Some carry bows.

PAUL: *The toll gate has been long abandoned until about 6 months ago, when Jacques Cirot and his band of hunted outlaws found it while foraging. They have set the place up as a base for raids against the surrounding countryside, and rely on the dangers of the forest and the fortified house itself to keep their enemies at bay. Jacques is a canny leader, but prone to bouts of violent temper when thwarted. This has kept him a minor brigand, but he aspires to becoming a true bandit king. The arrival of the PCs will be a concern to him - he wants his new base kept secret, and the party will have to be dealt with.*

Jacques's options will depend on the players. If they flee, he will send his best trackers with groups of 3 or 4 armed brigands to try and locate them. The rest of the brigands will then be summoned in by sharp blasts of hunting horns. If the players rush the toll gate, they will face a stiff battle as Jacques commands at least twice the party's size in armed and moderately skilled men. The brigands will fight until either at least half are dead or badly wounded, or if Jacques is killed or captured.

The ravine cannot be crossed at any point for miles in either direction of the bridge. A rapid and

dangerous river dashes through the base of the ravine, it's churning white water revealing many sharp rocks. The ravine is a scant 20 metres wide, but the drop to the rocks below is nearly 50 metres.

PAUL: *The point here is that the only safe way across the ravine is by the bridge. Detouring to either side will prove to take days (with further hazards of the forest to be dealt with). Tantalise the players with views of open fields and the occasional cottage on far hills beyond the forest edge.*

Within the walls of the fortified house are enough stolen supplies to last a month or so. In Jacques's room, his fur covered bed and sparse furniture are worth a few gold coins. A large steel bound wooden chest (locked) contains the pick of the band's loot. About 100 gold coins, a few small gems, some bottles of fine brandy and a smaller chest containing 4 vials marked with an unidentifiable script. These potions can be whatever the GM desires, from simple perfume to exotic potions of healing or magical effects.

PAUL: *If the band is defeated, the PCs deserve some rewards. Those offered should be modest or rich depending on the difficulty of overcoming the bandits. I tend to try and keep the rewards simple and easily explained as riches the bandits could have stolen. If there are magical treasures given, make sure the bandits and especially Jacques had any worthwhile use of them. For example, if he had a magical sword, he would be wearing it and using it.*

Once the brigands are defeated, or avoided, the way to the forest's edge will be open. The trees will thin and more and more open meadows will appear. The great road leads the bedraggled party out into the open meadows of the forest's edge. Ahead will be glimpsed a newer road, which leads them on to their next adventure. ■



Hidden Agendas

How to Design a Memorable Nephilim Campaign

by Chris Slee

Chaosium's Nephilim roleplaying game assumes a world of hidden elites struggling for control of that most precious of resources, humanity. This makes it a perfect system for those of us interested in conspiracy and espionage campaigns. However, careful thought is needed to overcome the pitfalls that are not immediately obvious when designing such a campaign. While this article discusses designing campaigns for Nephilim, the principles are general and the framework provided here can be applied to any game system. Understanding the conspiracy genre, while not vital, certainly cannot hurt. Spend some time reading spy stories or books about famous conspiracies like the JFK assassination and Mafia operations, among others. You will gain valuable insights from these.

The Framework

This article presents a framework on which you can develop conspiratorial games. The framework is just that: a bare lattice that describes only the overall shape of the campaign. On this lattice the referee hangs the various schemes, sub-plots, non-player characters and events the players may encounter. It is a solid foundation both you and your players can build on as the campaign progresses. It frees the referee to interact more with the players rather than waiting for them to find the clue that leads to the next section of plot, and allows the referee more time to develop the non-player characters.

Most referees make the mistake of detailing every little thing when designing a campaign. There is simply no need to know the maiden name of the mother of the Templar lurking behind a door the player characters may never open. You need only detail what the players want to explore at the time. Add more detail when they become curious about a new aspect of the campaign. Every referee knows that the greater the detail of a particular part of the campaign, the less likely the player characters are to ever actually visit it.

By starting with the lattice and adding detail only when required, you allow your players to have a say in the shape and progress of the campaign. They appreciate knowing their characters' actions can affect the game world, that they can make a difference to the plot. They always find their own direction and this is the simplest way of adapting to that.

Another benefit of the framework is that if the players come up with a better solution to a part of the campaign than the one you thought of, you can fit their suggestion into your open framework and quietly take the credit. If the structure is set up properly, eventually the player characters will move into the areas of the campaign you thought they'd explore when you were designing it.

The Essentials

A good conspiracy campaign, like a good spy story, is a learning experience for the characters as piece by piece they discover the secret of the conspiracy and decide how they should deal with it. An espionage or conspiracy story almost always unfolds in this way. The main characters realise they are in the middle of a power struggle between at least two protagonists. Then they discover what it is that everyone is competing for. Finally, they get to understand why the protagonists are interested in this thing. Understanding why the protagonists act the way they do and what they want is arguably the most important part of the plot and the part that provides the most fun for players.

The insights you get reading espionage and conspiracy stories focus on one point. There is a secret at the heart of the conspiracy, and possession of this secret will give one side dominion, or at least a strong advantage, over the other. It is something that allows one side to achieve its goals or defeat its opposition by radically changing the balance of power between whatever occult groups you include in your campaign. Also, it must also be meaningful. Whoever controls the secret, controls the world. No one struggles for centuries behind the thin veil we call reality for a recipe for chicken soup.

Examine balances of power around the world and throughout history. Usually, the opponents are struggling for the best way to get a greater share of a contested resource than the enemy. The Gulf War was an (arguable) example of this. Both Iran and the Western Alliance wanted possession of the valuable oil production and supply facilities of Kuwait. In this case, the secret is the means to secure the resource oil. At other times, the secret is the resource itself, such as a stolen nuclear device, Akhenaton's magical tablets of Arcanum Lore or a book of magics not previously understood or thought possible.

How do you translate these insights into a Nephilim campaign that players will talk about for years to come? The first order of business is to decide what the secret of your campaign will be. Perhaps it is not a chicken soup recipe at all but a complex metaphysical cipher expressed in the most mundane terms. Why would someone go to such trouble? The cipher encrypts a new form of magic that allows the caster to travel instantaneously to the planets and soak up pure elemental Ka straight from the source rather than drawing on the dim and contaminated reflection of it received by the Earth. Possession of this ability means that Agartha is just around the corner. Someone who knows this magic would be close to all-powerful. A group adept at this magic could bend anyone to their will, level cities, control governments, and so on. Clearly this disturbs the balance of power. Something this valuable is definitely worth fighting for.

The secret need not be obvious to the players when they start the campaign. In fact, it is better if they have no idea what they have landed themselves in. The aim of the campaign for the players must always be to discover what lies beneath the veils of secrecy and deception they encounter.

Reds Under the Beds

You've decided the secret of your campaign. What next? Obviously, you need some protagonists to be engaged in the centuries long battle for possession of it. For instance, who stands to gain from the now infamous "chicken soup cipher"? Nephilim, of course. The spiritual enlightenment of Agartha is something almost all nephilim strive for. The Rosicrucians would be interested. They understand the concept of Agartha but want humanity to achieve it without being subjected to possession by nephilim. That overworked of all secret societies, the Templars, would also be keen to hold this secret, if for no other reason than to stop the nephilim getting it. It's more likely, however, they want it so they can raise their own Solar-Ka to such a high level that they can be assured of completing their Great Plan.

The most important thing to note about the protagonists is their motivation. Remember that at this point all you are doing is determining the framework for your campaign. Now is not the time for details so concentrate on some fairly basic questions. Why are they there? What do they want? What do they stand to gain? Why do they bother? The Templars have not existed for a thousand years just for the fun of it. They have definite goals and plans. If you cannot think of a good reason why a group would be involved, leave it out. The campaign will be better for it.

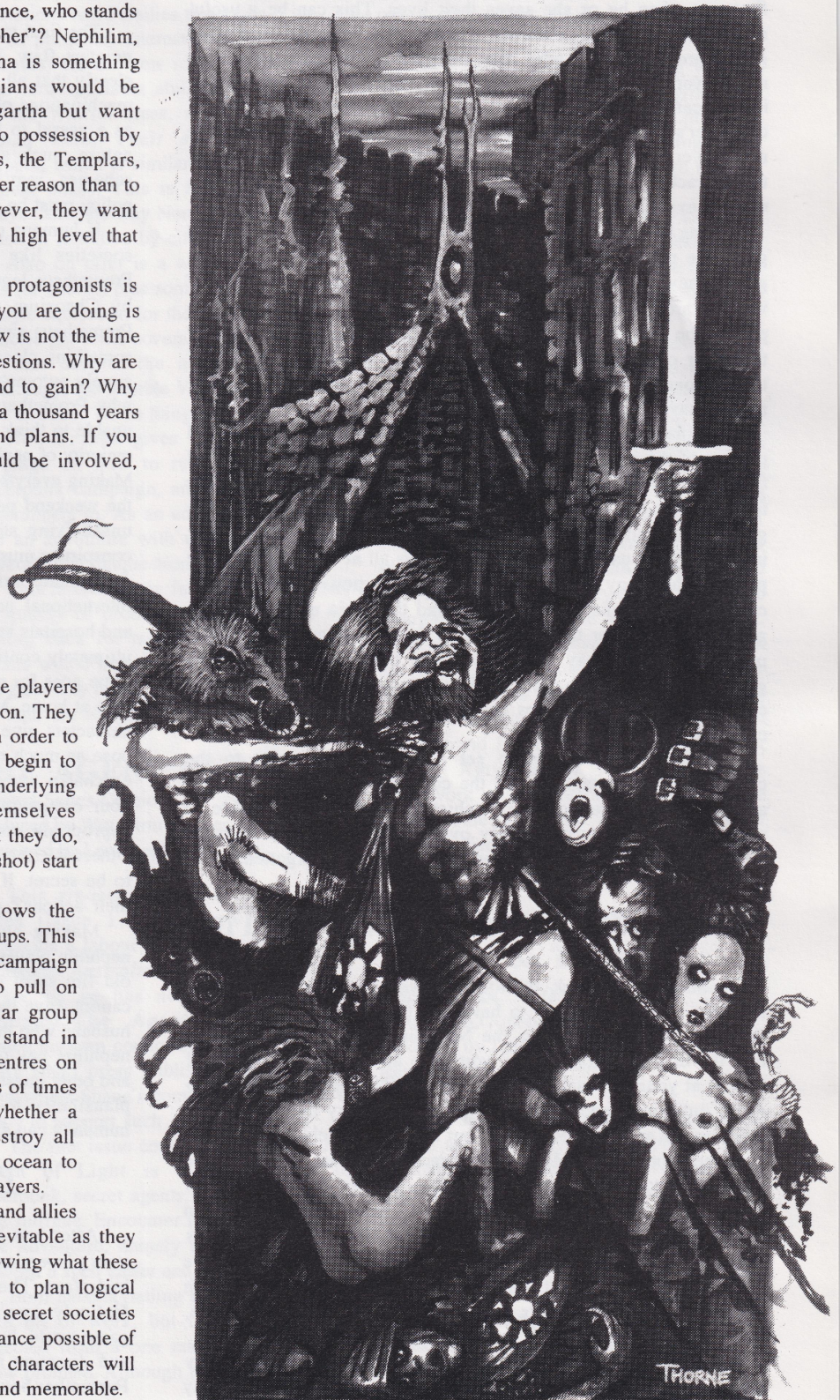
Providing these groups with clear motivation for their actions gives the referee a number of advantages in play. First, it makes your job a lot easier when you're trying to determine what these groups will do. It gives reasons for secret societies to act. The Templars don't turn up just because it's your Friday night Nephilim session or because you forgot to give the players a good combat last Friday. They turn up for a reason. They have plans and steps that need to be completed in order to achieve their goal. After a while, the players will begin to see a pattern in the groups' actions, some order underlying the apparent chaos by which they find themselves surrounded. By giving the groups reasons for what they do, the players will eventually (and I know it's a long shot) start putting two and two together to get besides seven.

Motivation serves a second purpose. It allows the characters to discover what is important to the groups. This provides them with an understanding of how the campaign world works and gives you a few good tricks to pull on them. When the characters know why a particular group wants something, they can decide where they stand in relation to that group. Suppose your campaign centres on the discovery by scientists of a compound hundreds of times deadlier to nephilim than Orichalka. Knowing whether a secret society wants to use the compound to destroy all nephilim or wants to bury it at the bottom of the ocean to save nephilim is immediately important to your players.

The plans of the players characters' opponents and allies will change during the course of play. This is inevitable as they react and respond to the actions of the players. Knowing what these groups want and what motivates them allows you to plan logical and consistent responses. Always remember that secret societies are not stupid and will give themselves the best chance possible of achieving their aims. In this way, the non-player characters will seem more alive and the campaign more plausible and memorable.

"Who Was That Masked Man?"

You've decided the secret of the campaign, the groups involved and outlined their aims and plans. What you have done is establish a solid framework for your campaign. Now, you can start filling in some detail. You need some way of bringing the elites hiding in the shadows into the foreground of the player characters' minds. One technique for doing this is to use a single non-player character who typifies that society's aims. The non-player character may have



underlings and thugs to do his or her dirty work, but the players should be aware that these underlings are merely extensions of the non-player character. This gives the players someone to relate to. The characters can meet or otherwise encounter this non-player character and form an opinion of him or her and, by extension, the secret society he or she represents. How the non-player character treats the characters is one of the major factors in determining this.

First impressions matter. If a non-player character is first encountered gunning for the characters, the players will form a different opinion of him or her than if the non-player character is first met when he or she saves their lives. This can be a useful referee tool, especially since the characters may not yet know what groups are involved or what they are fighting for at this stage. Any non-player character befriending the players can betray them later in the campaign. Or, the players can discover the non-player character's true motivation and decide themselves to betray the non-player character. Maybe the non-player character is treating the characters badly to convince them to get out of the situation without explaining to them what is really going on.

Seeing how non-player characters react and treat the game world gives the player characters information about the world and the group they are dealing with. If the opposition is unafraid of walking around in public displaying illegal weapons of ridiculous power, the players will probably think that either they can too or that their opponents have the police force so heavily controlled that no one would try to stop them anyway. In either case, the players have learned something valuable.

Non-player characters can also be used to show the internal politics of the groups involved in your conspiracy. If a number of factions exist within a hidden elite, create a non-player character for each faction. Each faction has its own goals or slant on the group goal, and assigns someone to protect its interests. Do not introduce these extra non-player characters all at once. Surprise the players when they think they understand the power play they are caught in. Once the players understand the basic motivation of a group, it is time for these factions to make their appearance. The player characters may align or oppose themselves to an entire group or just to one faction within a group. It is not necessary to create factions within groups but it may give the campaign a bit of extra spice.

Another good idea is to set a definite end point to the campaign. The protagonists in the conspiracy have definite aims and goals. If these goals are achieved or prove impossible to achieve, the game is effectively over. A campaign that drags on beyond its logical end point soon dissolves and is forgotten.

History of the World And All That

Another good trick with non-player characters is for the nephilim player characters to have met these people in past lives. Because the background to the Nephilim game setting stretches into the dim mists of history, you have all the marvels of world history at your disposal. Plunder it at will. Not only does this help to fill out your game world by making its history live rather than exist simply as words on a page, but it allows the characters to see how the protagonists plans have fared in the past and may give some clues to their plans for the future. Do the Templars always follow the same attack plan? If so, your players have an opportunity to think up a successful defence. Why did the Templars fail in the past? What stopped them achieving their goals? How are their goals today different from those they had 400 years ago? Each strategy an elite has used is their road to a goal, and, in this case, all roads do lead to Rome.

If a large number of your players have had past lives at roughly the same periods in history, you have a perfect opportunity to play

out flashbacks. Set a session in one of these periods and let the player characters encounter and deal with the non-player characters and secret societies as they existed then. It is definitely a better way of giving the players information and clues than simply telling them. When the players can see and feel the secret society's actions, they will understand them better. Perhaps the Templar that killed a character in a past life had a chance to gloat about his or her plans in typical Hollywood villain fashion.

Humanity and Nephilim

The final trap to avoid is probably the Nephilim game system's greatest flaw. The Chaosium published background states very clearly that all we see as human activity is really a front for the machinations of nephilim. Humans, it states, are worthless except as a vessel to hold nephilim. While many events of an historical nature, such as natural disasters, wars, political and religious schemes, may be attributable to nephilim, Chaosium's official policy must be avoided for these reasons.

If humans can do nothing for themselves, how can the secret societies like the Templars exist? The whole point of the Prometheus legend, as understood by the Ancient Greeks and used by Chaosium to explain the origin of secret societies, is that Prometheus gave humanity a gift that transformed it from robots to something closer to the gods themselves. No longer were humans simply automatons but they controlled their own destinies. This is why Prometheus was punished. If humans are so ineffective and unable to think for themselves, how could they have destroyed the majority of nephilim as is said to have happened after Atlantis fell? Making everything down to which team wins the football game on the weekend part of a grand conspiracy leads to uninteresting and unsatisfying stories and campaigns. The shadowy events of the conspiracy must happen behind everyday life.

Humans must be a force in their own right. The local and international police and military forces, government departments and hospitals are staffed by humans, regardless of whether they are ultimately controlled by nephilim or some other secret group. The same goes for people running companies and making dinner for the kids at home. Mundane threats and assistance offered to the player characters give your campaign depth. A mugger with a knife can pose as much of a threat to the human host as a Templar with an Orichalka sword does to the nephilim inhabiting it. Humans in your campaign must be able to think for themselves, decide on appropriate courses of action and be effective when they act. Otherwise, there is little reason for the conspiracy and power play to be secret. If humans are so ineffective, why do nephilim hide their actions?

Making humans a power in your campaign also forces the nephilim player characters to deal with them. How does a millennia old fire spirit deal with being told to wash the dishes or that it cannot drive through a red light? What should a nephilim say to a husband who thinks his wife has suddenly gone insane? How does a nephilim pay for its exploits if it cannot hold down a job? These and other questions are important if for no other reason than to lend plausibility to your campaign. Dealing with the vast mass of humanity can even become the focus for particular adventures.

The Moment of Truth

After you have done all this work, you must eventually face your players and let them loose to wreak havoc on your carefully laid plans. The first session of a campaign is vital to its success. Not only does it introduce the characters to each other and to the game world, but it sets the overall mood and tone of the campaign and direction it will follow until the players discover their own. Remember how the way that conspiracy and spy stories unfold was

discussed at the beginning of the article. The first session should include all elements of your carefully designed framework, give the characters clues to what is happening and establish their position as ignorant, trapped and more than likely powerless.

This is actually easier to do than it seems and discussing here any specific strategy for doing it will simply serve to limit the imagination of the referee. However, all first sessions must answer several questions. The answers virtually write the first session for you.

First, when the campaign opens, are the nephilim player characters incarnate or trapped in their stasis items? If not, what brings the conspiracy to their attention? If so, how are they released and who does it? If the characters are incarnate at the start of the campaign, the referee needs to manufacture an event that draws them in. This focuses them on the mystery aspect of the campaign and forces the characters to question what is going on. If the characters start the campaign by being released from their stasis items, they are immediately thrown into contact with non-player characters, whether other nephilim or members of a secret society.

Here is one sure-fire way to think up plots and events for espionage and conspiracy games. Look at the newspaper, the Nephilim rule book, any novels you've read or videos you've seen lately and ask the fundamental question: Why?. Why do the characters behave the way they do? Why do they do what they do? Pick any event that takes your eye and think about what may be its "real" cause, assuming the game reality of Nephilim. What is behind the story reported in the newspaper, the event in the novel, the scene in the video or movie. Always look for how the balance of power is being altered by an event. Who stands to gain? Who stands to lose? What will they do when they win or lose? To a large extent, the event or the secret itself is unimportant. The effect on others is what you should concentrate on.

Next, who will the characters interact with? This may have already been provided by answering the first question. They need someone to give them at least one version of the events that have been happening in a game world up to this point. This version of events can be as biased and inaccurate as you like. The characters will discover the truth during the campaign. Any biases and inaccuracies, however, must serve a purpose. Perhaps the non-player character telling the story has been deluded by his or her conspiratorial superiors. Perhaps he or she thinks that by stretching the truth the player characters can be made to join his or her side in the struggle.

Lastly, the players need something to do. Naturally, this goes without saying. The answers to earlier questions often suggest the answer to this. Whatever it is, it should involve them further in the tangled webs of conspiracy. Such things could include having the player characters find or retrieve some item or person needed by a group to complete a step toward their goal. It may be thwarting the actions or plans of another group. In any case, it should serve to make the player characters known to non-player characters and other groups in the campaign.

Time spent determining these few details can make or break a campaign. They give you a meaningful basis to the conspiracy, something that is worth the non-player characters' time and trouble. They also tell you why they would bother in the first place and helps you determine their actions and reactions to the player characters. Non-player characters are active and this means that the player characters' actions to aid or thwart them can affect the game world. This gives the referee and players a realistic world filled with plausible characters, and a campaign destined to live on in the minds of your players long after it has finished. These guidelines provide a way of developing a framework on which you can hang whatever interests the players at the time without disturbing or having to rewrite other parts of the campaign. ■

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"We look before and after,
and pine for what is not:
our sincerest laughter
with some pain is fraught;
our sweetest songs are those that tell
of saddest thought...."
Shelley

Just been listening to TripleJ, as is my wont, to a discussion by an enterprising MD (and I haven't met one yet who wasn't - in the Rockefeller sense of enterprise) of his new book on drugs and drug interactions. It has got me thinking (oh oh). Being TripleJ the focus turned immediately to illegal drug interactions with other legal and illegal drugs. What a great gimmick, doc, should sell lots of product! What about that old Hippocratic oath? The marketplace of the lowest common denominator. Movies, CDs, books - everywhere you look taste has been replaced by hype. Movies about the Net and VR that would, and do, insult the intelligence of your average 12 year old - who know more about the subject than all the scriptwriters in Old Holly Wood. TV shows that make outrageous claims about "extraordinary" events without the slightest evidence other than the "earnest" testimonial of brain dead witnesses. Increasingly irrelevant music videos that feature no-talent jerks who pose better than they play - if they can play an instrument at all! What does that say about the suckers that fall for it? Lots. None of it flattering. Probably the same market demographic that rushed out to buy that loser's video on Executions (It's against the death penalty - honest!).

What tickled my sense of the ironic was the poor soul who rang up The J's to say that he'd just been diagnosed as schizophrenic and that he'd been told his abuse of alcohol, speed and dope was the problem. His response? "...and I reckon that's a load of bullshit!" Discussion revolved around his assertion that he couldn't be mentally ill because everyone knew you had to be predisposed to mental illness, you just couldn't "get it off drugs". Presumably he'd had his entire genome mapped prior to the call. I have to ask the question; why are people so bleedin' thick? Let's not pretend we don't abuse our bodies, we like to party, we may even do it in ways our parents or partners might not like, but let's not pretend it doesn't hurt you. "You can't stop me from using dope, Dad, cause you use alcohol and everybody knows how bad that is!" Yeah, and Ecstasy is perfectly harmless. Let's be honest, at least with ourselves. Go ahead and drop a tab, it's your body - just don't come crying to me when they diagnose you with earwigs in the cerebellum. These things work because they mimic the natural chemical messengers in your brain, to me it's the biological equivalent of sticking a big shining screwdriver into the back of the TV. ZAP! Call me old fashioned.

The Analytical Engine

by Peter Crank

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Greg Egan is the best writer in speculative fiction in Australia today. By a long way. The evidence? **Our Lady of Chernobyl** (MirrorDanse Books, \$9.95). Egan is considered to be one of the best by his peers, he writes solid SF and cyberpunk in a way that makes Gibson sound like a know-nothing lamer (the people celebrated by the media are not necessarily the best in their field - but I'm not telling you something you don't already know unless you're a fan of David Eddings or Ann McCaffrey). Egan spins off more techno wonders in one sentence than the rest manage in a novel. His descriptive prose is evocative and tinged with bitter humour. Consider this from Chaff, the lead story in the collection:

"From the air, there was no obvious sign that we'd arrived; for the last two hundred kilometres, we'd been passing over rain forest-cleared in patches for plantations and mines, ranches and timber mills, shot through with rivers like metallic threads-but most of it resembling nothing so much as an endless expanse of broccoli."

Chaff deals with the consequences of bio-engineering and the enormous potential it has to change human society - from the inside. Egan postulates a virus that can rewire the structure of your brain and his explanations sound chillingly plausible. Not recommended to anyone with the flu. This is territory covered by Greg Bear in his amazing novel, **Blood Music** a few years back - go and try it; scare yourself to death. But I digress. On the face of it **Our Lady of Chernobyl** is a collector's item, aimed at the collector's market with a limited run of 500 numbered copies, and as such it is a gem. But more than that it is a collection, albeit a small one, of four great stories. Worth the asking price? I mean it's a short evening's read, maybe even a train ride, but, I think, definitely money well spent. While you're at it try Egan's **Permutation City** or his first novel, **Quarantine** (Legend, \$11.95), you will not be disappointed. Locus (the American journal of things SF) gave **Quarantine** high praise, read it and see for yourself.

More from MirrorDanse; **The Man Who Lost Red** (MirrorDanse Books, \$9.95), contains two novellas by Terry Dowling, a man I have sung the praises of in earlier Engines. While Dowling is a gifted writer, I found less entertainment value in this book, if I can be forgiven such a lowbrow measure of a book's worth. Dowling reminds me in many ways of Jack Vance, a man Dowling knows well, and like Vance can require more effort on the reader's part than he may be prepared to give. In short, **The Man Who Lost Red** cost me more than I got. A good book for the collector (another numbered run of 500) but if you want more bang for your book try **Wormwood** (Apelion Publications) or **Twilight Beach** (Aphelion Publications). Maybe I was having an off day.

Much of what sells as Fantasy these days is crap - no, since the average paperback is printed on low quality paper lets say that most of what is sold as Fantasy these days is toilet paper. In issues past you have suffered my comments on the likes of Forward and Eddings and (closer to home) Shillitoe. Bleuh! Well, somebody likes it. Remember the bell-shaped curve - it holds a terrible lesson for us all - fifty percent of the population lies to the left of the centre line and some of them can, apparently, read. For those of us somewhere to the right of centre there is **Nobody's Son** by Canadian writer Sean Stewart (Ace Fantasy, \$12.95). What happens after the fairy tale ending? Shielder's Mark is a commoner and his father disappeared when he was very young. The consequences of his departure (nothing more fantastic than a father running out on a family he no longer wants) have made Mark a driven man, a man who pushes himself hard, training with his sword in the dark fields after the day's plowing is done and dreams of defeating the curse of his birthright by being the first man to break the spell of Red Keep. The Keep lies at the centre of Ghostwood and a spell causes the Keep to be locked in time, all who enter replay the same day over and over. As Mark approaches through Ghostwood, where all other heroes have met their doom, he meets those heroes making their own assaults against the ghosts of the Keep. Success is only the beginning of Mark's troubles. What does a commoner know of Court intrigue, or even good manners at table? Mark has to deal with the consequences of his success and his claim for the hand of the King's youngest daughter. For though her hand is his, her mind is very much her own. And worse yet, the breaking of the spell has let magic loose again and the ghosts held in the Ghostwood walk the land once more.

Nobody's Son bristles with tension between the main characters, especially between Mark (uncomfortable in his new role as Lord of the Manor) and his new bride (attracted to the Mark and his gentle ways,

his quick wit and his Arnold-like muscles - but mightily pissed off at being "given" to a man and a commoner at that) and her lady in waiting (who has shared a special friendship with the princess since they were children and resents Mark's presence and his ignorance). Members of the Court have their own agendas and Mark has written himself in to their great irritation.

Stewart achieves an interesting mix here, part fantasy and part feminist soap opera (will the Princess Gail eventually give in to her feelings and sleep with Mark, knowing that pregnancy will bring an end to her own freedom and deliver her a set of responsibilities she doesn't want?). If you hunger for something with more meat than your average: "I'm the Prophesied Seventh Son and here's my enchanted Flyswat to prove it. I'm here to free the land of Clashing Syllables from the overbearing and totally unspeakable Fiend/ Wizard Unpronounceable", and you like something with a quirky style (the dialogue is a contextual mix of modern idiom, ee-by-gum dialect and Shakespearean pretension - and it works beautifully) then Nobody's Son should be available through specialist book stores. Order now to avoid disappointment.

I'm totally wired now. I've got **Galaxy** TV. No more worrying what to do when the phone doesn't ring on a Saturday night. I'm frying my brain in a different way. Step One:

Fire up Sputnik and log on to Access One and start Netscape cruisin' the URL jungle. Step two: Fire up the big screen and the stereo, press go on the Galaxy remote. Watch, listen, absorb. Stingray, Joe 90 (Way Cool), Bonanza. I even watched Ren & Stimpy (Talk about the triumph of form over content). Trouble is, I'm so plugged in to the world I'm losing touch with that thing labelled Reality. I'm moving in a different time frame, dwelling in an info-zone: Hot Java, RealAudio, HTML, MDS, BBC, CNN, Mechwarrior 2; they're all happening in real time all around me now. I'm drifting in a cloud of coded data streams and I don't feel like coming back.

Scan you later. Is later a valid concept in the space in which I now float? It's all upstream or downstream, but no matter. See you downstream. ■

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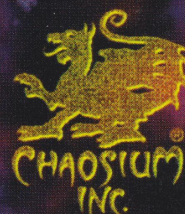
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